

Reconciling Hitlerian Aggression to Taylorian Diplomatic Narrative
Final Submission

by
Arran Kearney

A paper submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
HIST 494: Senior Thesis Seminar

Milligan University
Johnson City, Tennessee
18th April, 2024

"...Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:
 "Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
 Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
 For now I see the true old times are dead,
 When every morning brought a noble chance,
 And every chance brought out a noble knight...
 And the days darken round me, and the years,
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds..."¹

Inhabiting AJP Taylor

"Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so
 Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to
 misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; whoever knew Truth
 put to the worse, in a free and open encounter."²

In 1961, Mr. Alan John Percival Taylor published his *Origins of the Second World War*, and some sixty years later it still stands as the central point of revisionist reference for those studying the genesis of the conflict. Much maligned, though never ignored, it might be broached that the main criticism of AJP Taylor's work is not truly one rooted in historiography. Certainly the work exhibits something of a wilful disregard for key evidence, but greater issue seems to be taken with its moral direction as a whole. Taylor stands accused of harbouring the same misconceptions as those disciples of appeasement in the 1930s. He recounts the descent of Europe into the Second World War through the "language of sweet reasonableness"³ and commits, as it were, the same folly as Mr. Chamberlain; approaching the issues at hand as if all statesmen sought only their respective national interests, in which they never hold war as an object of policy but only as a means of final redress. A rational, diplomatic image of Hitler does

¹ Alfred Tennyson, *Morte D' Arthur* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1912), 19.

² John Milton, *Areopagatica; A speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, to the Parliament of England.* (London, 1644)

³ Duff Cooper, "Personal Explanation to The House of Commons," UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, 3rd October 1938, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1938-10-03/debates/87f088c7-4ff9-4bbd-b66f-0319a28d9d46/PersonalExplanation?highlight=language%20sweet%20reasonableness#contribution-78e6b60a-d72d-4fbd-9c25-7a264c6b9565>. Accessed 5th March, 2024. A 'Personal Explanation' occurs upon the resignation of a Minister from the Government, after which he is permitted to offer a testimony in the appropriate House. Duff Cooper MP resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty in protest of the Munich Agreement, following on from Anthony Eden's resignation several months prior. Accessed 5th March, 2024.

not sit well with those histories that place him “in the tradition of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon”⁴ - a conqueror who sought little but that end in his foreign policy. Nor does it sit well with those who believe that the German Chancellor’s foreign policy ought not to be separated from his domestic program which, when extended to his conquered domains during the war, amounted to a depth and breadth of human crime that defies expression and staggers the imagination.

In answering these criticisms, and in defending Taylor, we must submit ourselves to the inflexible ideal of Truth, which is the end of all good history. “Since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth,” says John Stuart Mill, “it is only by the collision of adverse opinion that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.”⁵ Only part of the prevailing opinion has proved unassailable. Herr Hitler was not, as Taylor holds, akin to every other European statesman. He *did* undoubtedly hold aggression as the core of his foreign policy, and he *was* undoubtedly guilty of all the crimes of domestic policy for which he stands accused. But a further contention of prevailing opinion, carried against the morality of Taylor’s writing itself, is less sustainable. There is at play in these condemnations a certain fear that Taylor’s work is actively ceding legitimacy to the lamentable policies of Nazi Germany by deigning to consider it as a ‘normal’ actor with the systems of European diplomacy before the war. There is a quiet, unspoken conviction that Herr Hitler and his Germany must be somehow exempt from the rational discourse that has otherwise characterised historic debate on the ‘German Question,’ lest one should fall into the trap of distracting from or diminishing his actions. Somehow, somehow, and only in this special case, the historian's honest endeavour towards objectivity, which is his discipline's greatest virtue, is foundered and sunk upon the rocks

⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2011), 12.

⁵ JS Mill, *On Liberty*, (London, The Walter Scott Publishing Co, 2011), 98.

of evil. This might serve certain perceived notions of virtue, but it is not antecedent to Truth. Taylor's is an sincere effort to go where none else have dared and his conclusions, though at times erroneous, were sufficient to show that the cause of Truth might be furthered through his methods. It is from these methods, employed throughout his career, that Taylor came to observe that "human blunders usually do more to shape history than human wickedness."⁶ He claims the origins of the war to have been "far from being premeditated," arguing that the general conflict which erupted over Poland was "the result on both sides of diplomatic blunders."⁷

Taking up the study of these blunders and diplomatic mistakes, it would seem that there is sufficient room within them to reconcile to some extent both Taylor's rational diplomatic analysis and more traditional views on Herr Hitler's own personal ambitions. Taylor's portrayal of these ambitions as being *solely* the product of opportunism is wrong, because Herr Hitler had long foreseen his nation's expansion, but this does not make his arguments meritless. The German Chancellor obviously employed various means to reach his ends: positioning himself, as Taylor puts it, "like Joshua before the walls of Jericho, he preferred to wait until the forces opposing him had been sapped by their own confusion and themselves forced success upon him."⁸ His opportunism stemmed from certain Allied "blunders" which are acknowledged by both sides of the *Origins* debate. Seeking to study these blunders and properly assess their diplomatic weight does not necessarily lead a historian to forget or diminish Herr Hitler's role in instigating conflict, as Taylor did at times. Instead it might enable a historian to better understand how both the Allies and Axis powers came to a place in September 1939 where they committed to a war over Poland that neither side seemed to anticipate or desire at that given moment.

⁶ AJP Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War* (New York, Atheneum, 1983), 219

⁷ *Ibid.*, 216

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71

The Munich Pact was the zenith of Allied, though particularly British appeasement, and it is here that Allied blunders and Hitlerian opportunism are made indistinguishable within the formation of a single diplomatic system. Examining this and the events that ensued shows Taylor's judgements on Allied policy to hold a great deal of water, so long as they are modified to contain the fixed historic principle of Hitlerian Aggression. In studying the erroneous precedents Great Britain established under the Munich Agreement, together with the further blunders she committed from that point and the German invasion of Poland, she might be said to have contributed at least as much as Hitler's own aggression towards the joining of general war in Europe as it happened *at that specific place and specific time*. This is not, vitally, a moral judgement, but a diplomatic one. Attributing responsibility is not the same as issuing moral condemnation, it is simply an assessment of the logic by which nation states weigh the potential profits and consequences of their actions, moral or immoral.

The Shifting Principles of British Foreign Policy

*"O Statesmen, guard us, guard the eye, the soul
Of Europe, keep our noble England whole..."*⁹

The traditions of British policy in Europe are well known, and Herr Hitler had been personally acquainted with them during the Great War. In *Mein Kampf* he summarised this policy-in-action as being "deliberately aimed at preventing by all means necessary the rise of any great European power above the level of the general scale of magnitudes, and, if necessary, to crush it by military means."¹⁰ It was with the goal of preventing any single nation dominating "by brutal force the Continent of Europe,"¹¹ as Mr. Duff Cooper put it in his own criticisms of the Munich Agreement, that "we fought against Napoleon Bonaparte, and against Louis XIV of

⁹ Alfred Tennyson, *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*, (Edward Moxon, London, 1852), 12

¹⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Michigan, Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 613.

¹¹ Duff Cooper, "Personal Explanation to The House of Commons."

France and Phillip II of Spain.”¹² It was for that reason that Great Britain had sent her sons to France and Flanders but twenty years before. The Treaty of Versailles, for all its flaws, was nevertheless erected upon that same policy, seeking to prevent Germany from once again rising to the dominant position she had held in Europe since the War of 1870. This end was ultimately betrayed by ill-judged means that proved inadequate either in holding the Germans down or conciliating them to the new order.¹³ As regards economic and political power in Europe, Germany lacked any true rival. Her return to the top table after the Great War was almost inevitable. Territorial divisions were part of Versailles’ answer to this prospect, but the Treaty “did not, as it were, enforce itself”¹⁴ as Taylor puts it.

The reduction of Germany could not be maintained *ad infinitum*, and it could not even be sustained in the short-term without concerted action. It was natural that she should seek to undermine the clauses that bound her, not owing to malice necessarily, but because that is what any defeated nation in such a situation would seek to do. If the victorious Allies proposed to hold the most powerful nation in Europe within a false and unmoving state, a suspended reality almost, then they could only do so by the threat of renewed force. This threat of force dissipated almost as soon as the signatories put pen to paper at Versailles. The Americans and British withdrew as swiftly as possible, and the French were left alone to contend with a power that had proved itself her military superior half a century before. As for Germany herself, the stringent and oftentimes artificial territorial restraints that had been placed upon her were made to seem all the more egregious by the generous treatment given to other states. Kennedy notes that the great Wilsonian “principle of self-determination, liberally applied to the small ethnic groups of eastern

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ruth Henig, *The Origins of The Second World War 1933-1941*. (Yorkshire, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1995), 5

¹⁴ AJP Taylor, *Origins of The Second World War*, 28

Europe, had been denied to her.”¹⁵ The employment of self-determination was the epicentre of Versailles’ fatal compromising weakness. Better that it had not been applied at all than that it should have been applied unequally. Germany *had* been denied what had been given to other nations, and this denial was founded upon a prejudice which is stated quite openly in the Treaty’s War Guilt Clause. The righteousness of this prejudice is immaterial - what matters is its impermanence. The conviction of a European generation regarding Germany could not outlast and continually overcome the principle of self-determination, which had become the watchword of the emerging European order. Alike with Prometheus, the grievances of Versailles were torn afresh each day, with every passing year only increasing the sense of injustice about all that had transpired. The contradiction between the stated moral purposes the Allies had pursued at Versailles and the vassal-like condition of Germany in the 1920s steadily began to play on the British conscience as she advanced further away from the years of the Great War. She had the luxury of relative isolation, in which she could indulge in introspection, far away from the spectre of German militarism that so haunted the minds of France’s chief ministers. Catherine Cline believes that “criticisms of various aspects of the peace settlement by elite groups ranging from bankers to bishops of the Church of England contributed heavily to the public’s increasingly negative perception of the entire Treaty.”¹⁶ The treaty had never been especially popular, and it became less so as the Great War steadily receded from the forefront of the public mind. Reflecting this general consensus of opinion, His Majesty’s Government had adopted, by

¹⁵ P.M Kennedy “Idealists and Realists: British Views of Germany 1864-1939,” *Transactions of Royal Historical Society*, no. 25 (1975): 151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679090>. Accessed 1st March 2024.

¹⁶ Cline, Catherine Ann. “British Historians and the Treaty of Versailles.” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 20, no. 1 (1988): 43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4049797>.

1937, a position that explicitly sought to “rectify the mistakes connected with the Versailles Treaty.”¹⁷

One of these ‘mistakes’ was the subject of the Munich summit. Invoking this public mood, Taylor argues that “British policy over Czechoslovakia originated in the belief that Germany had a moral right to the Sudeten German territory, on grounds of national principle.”¹⁸ This may have held some genuine credence but, as traditional interpretations attest, self-determination to Herr Hitler was merely a disguise for expansionist ambitions. The German Chancellor had long since condemned his country's pre-1914 borders as insufficient to “improve the relation in which...we find ourselves with respect to other world powers.”¹⁹ Taylor does not sufficiently recognise that the restoration of these borders through the dissolution of Versailles could only be a first step in the rise of the Third Reich. German policy throughout the 1930s might be painted as something of a straight and undeviating line, by which Herr Hitler prepared to “achieve the armed preparation for final liberation and the reuniting of the unhappy oppressed portions with the motherland.”²⁰ Rearmament was a constant feature, anticipating the “final reckoning with France”²¹ and the acquisition of “new soil and territory” in “Russia and its vassal border states.”²² As that rearmament was taking effect Taylor’s arguments-from-opportunism can make their hay. The German Chancellor was clearly willing to advance his line of policy by other means, seeking to unilaterally “push through his plans concerning Austria and Czechoslovakia without making any commitments to the Western powers,” as Slawomir puts it.²³ He was able to do this because of the Allies’ “refus[al] to acknowledge that German demands for

¹⁷ Dębski Slawomir and Mikhail M. Narinsky, *The Causes of World War II: Poland, The Soviet Union, and the Crisis of The Versailles System*, (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). Page 108.

¹⁸ AJP Taylor, *Origins of The Second World War*, 189.

¹⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 651.

²⁰ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 610.

²¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 653.

²² Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 654.

²³ Slawomir, Narinsky, “The Causes of World War II,” 108.

a revision of the Versailles system could lead to war.”²⁴ Allied policy charted a swooping and looping course, constantly seeking to adapt and forestall and conciliate the German line, contorting itself until, as it came about, no contortion was possible any longer. The “awful milestone”²⁵ of Munich was not out of keeping with what had passed before. Opportunities had arisen “at several junctures”²⁶ whereby Great Britain might have arrested the unfolding pattern of German expansion “without excessive effort or sacrifice.”²⁷ Each moment had been met with appeasement of some form. Appeasement, as a policy “based upon concessions made from a position of strength” is not pernicious in itself, so long as it is couched in careful moderation and backed by the credible threat of a forceful alternative. The Munich Agreement was not an appeasement arising out of self-assurance, but rather represented what Sbacchi calls a “surrender to terrifying German power.”²⁸ It was the moment that the Allies were shown to have lost their commanding influence in European diplomacy, but more than this it was the moment in which a new system was forged in place of Versailles through the active collaboration of Great Britain and the French Republic in the expansionist designs of Germany. In this the western democracies committed a dual blunder, whereby they opened up a power vacuum in Central Europe before prevailing on Germany to fill that vacuum.

Self-determination was the diplomatic ‘chink in the armour’ by which Versailles was transformed from a system of German containment into a mechanism of German expansion, but Munich represented a further evolution beyond this. In those negotiations “a cloak called

²⁴ Sławomir, Narinsky, “The Causes of World War II,” 108.

²⁵ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government,” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, 5th October 1938, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1938-10-05/debates/25851755-dbcd-4704-9334-fdf2574d6453/PolicyOfHisMajestySGovernment?highlight=awful%20milestone%20history#contribution-632bea2d-0bdf-4b64-9f48-5a8e4df1c7fe>. Accessed 23rd February 2024. *The motion under debate on this day reads as follows: "That this House approves the policy of His Majesty's Government by which war was averted in the recent crisis and supports their efforts to secure a lasting peace."*

²⁶ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939* (New York, Howard Fertig, 1971), ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁸ Alberto Sbacchi, “1938: An appraisal of the diplomacy of appeasement,” *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 46, no. 4 (184) (1979), 594. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42734407>.

self-determination”²⁹ was used to justify “the partition of a country”³⁰ without formal consultation with that country’s government, and in the face of existing French guarantees to the said country “for security against possible aggression and for the protection of their common interests.”³¹ Self-determination had been lauded as a pillar for the new European order, and now it had been utilised to destroy part of that order. In many ways the Munich Agreement contradicted not merely Versailles but the previous war upon which Versailles itself, together with the credibility of the Allies in this present moment, had been founded. Great Britain had entered into the Great War by determining “to keep its word and to act in accordance with its treaty obligations to its Allies.”³² This is what Mr. Churchill calls “Honour.”³³ The dishonourable diplomacy of 1938 was the precise inverse of 1914, where the question was not one of Czechoslovakian sovereignty but of Belgian neutrality. In those circumstances Germany had likewise invited Great Britain into collaboration, promising peace as her reward. It is vital to record the precise language of Mr. Asquith, for the manner in which he so clearly saw through the German perfidy is quite striking when framed it in the context of Czechoslovakian question:

...what are we to get in return for the betrayal of our friends and the dishonour of our obligations? What are we to get in return? A promise - nothing more; a promise as to what Germany would do in certain eventualities; a promise, be it observed - I am sorry to have to say it, but it must be put upon the record - given by a power which was at that very moment announcing its intention to violate its own treaty and inviting us to do the same. I can only say, if we had dallied or temporised we, as a Government, should have covered ourselves with dishonour...³⁴

It is true, one might say, that Great Britain was not bound at that moment by any formal treaty to Czechoslovakia, but the French Republic, with whom Britain *did* have a formal alliance,

²⁹ Cooper, “Personal Explanation to The House of Commons.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Treaty of Alliance and Friendship between France and Czechoslovakia.” Signed in Paris January 25th, 1924. *League of Nations Treaty Series, United Nations*. Registry Files 1919-1927. <https://archives.ungeneva.org/traite-dalliance-et-damitie-entre-la-france-et-la-tchecoslovaquie-signee-a-paris-le-25-janvier-1924-enregistrement-de-ce-traite>. Accessed 3rd March, 2024.

³² Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 288

³³ Ibid., 288

³⁴ Herbert Asquith, “Vote of Credit, £100,000,000,” Hansard Archives - UK Parliament, 6th August 1914.

most certainly was. It was upon the credibility of that and other such treaties with small states that the Allies exercised hard power upon the continent. The betrayal of the French-Czechoslovak alliance meant that the “French system of collective security was doomed.”³⁵ With all her efforts over the past twenty years undone “Paris was thrust back upon London”³⁶ and His Majesty’s Government began to take a leading role in Allied action, or lack thereof. The French, terminally weak it almost seemed, followed on behind. The British might have held no obligation to Czechoslovakia specifically, but she was a member of the League of Nations, in which “war or the threat of war” against any member nation was declared to be “a matter of concern to the whole league.”³⁷ More than this, one might say that a great deal of British diplomatic credit had been invested in nations like Czechoslovakia and Poland and Yugoslavia. These were the new nations that Great Britain had, to echo Mr. George Canning, “called into existence to redress the balance of the Old.”³⁸ To renounce the territorial validity of those nations was to renounce, in a single moment, all the diplomatic ground that Great Britain had traversed since 1919, and perhaps even since 1914.

In her departure from her traditional honourable policy Great Britain had taken a deeply radical step. Taylor claims that the Allies did not merely push Czechoslovakia to “commit suicide in order to secure their peace of mind,” but that they also “urged Hitler to make demands”³⁹ and this view seems to accord with the gratitude in which the British nation received

³⁵ Ibid, 579

³⁶ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939.” *World Politics*, 29, no. 3 (1977): 407 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010003>. Accessed 3rd March, 2024. “*The French strove to create a bastion against Germany on their own. This involved a short-lived occupation of the Rhineland, pacts with Eastern European states, an alliance with the dubious U.S.S.R., and temporary arrangements with Italy over Austria. None of these initially seemed capable of restraining Germany, and thus Paris was thrust back upon London. After 1936, Britain became the key to the maintenance of European peace and prevention of German revanche.*”

³⁷ “Covenant of the League of Nations” Signed in Paris, 28th June, 1919. *League of Nations Treaty Series, United Nations*. Article 11. <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/about/league-of-nations/covenant>. Accessed 21st February, 2024. “*Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any of the Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations.*”

³⁸ George Canning “Address on the King’s Message, Respecting Portugal” Hansard Archives - UK Parliament, 12th December, 1826.

³⁹ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 161

the settlement at Munich. British intellectual opinion had seemingly enjoined itself with the aims of Germany, celebrating each act of German aggression. There was a reason why Mr. Chamberlain, upon his return from Munich, was presented to rapturous crowds from the balcony of Buckingham Palace; an honour only accorded to Mr. Churchill upon his successful prosecution of the ensuing war. It was because the public had a deep and heartfelt support for this rapprochement, such support indeed that, as Eatwell notes, a “temporary rumour told of Cabinet Ministers who wished to hold a General Election to capitalise upon the nation's gratitude...”⁴⁰ The Allies were not surrendering their honour “solely through threat of war”, rather they had “deliberately set out to impose the cession of territory on the Czechs.”⁴¹ Taylor, with personal feelings that are difficult to discern, describes this as “a triumph of all that was best and most enlightened in British life,”⁴² and certainly many at the time thought it to be thus. Traditional histories rightly condemn the fervent pacifism that so gripped the fashionable echelons of British society in those years, against which only a few, largely those public men who were to prosecute the coming war, had the courage to rebel. Such opinion commanded British policy to pursue the prospect of peace in exchange for the dismemberment of a sovereign state. Czechoslovakia’s dismemberment drew forth a sense of adulation from a people that had looked upon the violation of Belgium in 1914 with near unbridled horror. The impermanent prejudice of German War Guilt had proved to be just that - Cline argues that historians themselves played a prominent role in “undermining the belief in German war guilt and thereby the moral justification in the public mind for controversial features of the peace settlement.”⁴³ Through all those years that led to Munich the intellectual classes were “chipping away at English morale”⁴⁴ as Orwell put it,

⁴⁰ Roger Eatwell, “Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 4 (1971): 122. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259689>. Accessed 17th March, 2024.

⁴¹ Taylor, 189

⁴² Ibid., 189

⁴³ Cline, Catherine Ann. “British Historians and the Treaty of Versailles.” 43.

⁴⁴ George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays: England your England*. (Harcourt, London, 1945), 275

realising only too late the truth of his famed maxim: “Pacifism is objectively pro-fascist. This is elementary common sense.”⁴⁵

The new system which buried Versailles and the League of Nations was practised at Munich and ‘formalised’ under the Anglo-German agreement of September 30th, 1938. The summits of great powers, such as were haltingly utilised during the Balkan crises that had littered the years before the Great War, were reverted to in a last attempt at ensuring Germany and Britain would, in the words of said declaration, “never go to war with one another again.”⁴⁶ This “method of consultation”⁴⁷ involving Germany, Britain, France, and Italy was established as the preferred mechanism to “deal with any other questions”⁴⁸ that might arise in the future. Thus the Versailles order was abandoned in an instant in favour of a “new system, based on equality and mutual confidence between the Four Great European Powers.”⁴⁹ The difficulty in this was that Great Britain and France had ensured their own inequality under the standards of the new system by the dishonourable means they had employed in erecting it. Both the Czech betrayal and the undignified abandonment of the Versailles damned them in the eyes of Europe. Even though the Allies had extended a guarantee to Czechoslovakia “against unprovoked aggression” for her “new boundaries”⁵⁰ it was clear to Mr. Churchill that at some point “Czechoslovakia will be engulfed in the Nazi regime.”⁵¹ Neither was this a fact only apparent to him: the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Mr. Edvard Benes had also believed “that Czechoslovakia would cease to exist as an independent country if the Sudeten demands were met.”⁵² Mr. Chamberlain was obliged to

⁴⁵ George Orwell, “Pacifism and War,” *Partisan Review*, August-September, 1942.

⁴⁶ “Anglo-German Note,” signed in Berlin, 30th September 1938, *Private Papers of the Imperial War Museum*. Accessed 24th February, 2024. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030005003>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Origins of The Second World War*, 187.

⁵⁰ “Munich Agreement” signed at Munich, September 29, 1938, between Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy. *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*. Accessed 5th March, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp>

⁵¹ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government.”

⁵² Edvard Benes to Radislav Rasin, “A Message to a Czechoslovak Politician in Prague”

tell Czechoslovakia what Mr. Asquith could not contemplate saying to Belgium; “that without her knowledge, Britain had bartered away to the power threatening her its obligation to keep its plighted word.”⁵³ This word of honour discredited, it became incumbent on surrounding small states to “make the best terms they [could] with the triumphant Nazi power.”⁵⁴ By unloosing themselves from the system of Versailles the Allies had unwittingly presented all Europe with a stark choice between themselves and the Axis powers - a choice made simple by the clear ascendancy of Germany and Italy. Germany had “liberated herself from all restraints” and become the dominant force in Europe, her diplomacy now being “the central reference point of world politics.”⁵⁵

The German-Italian Status Quo

*“Therefore, since he permits
Within himself unworthy powers to reign
Over free reason, God, in judgement just,
Subjects him from without to violent lords...”⁵⁶*

The Allies were locked in a diplomatic prison of their own making: “self-condemned to argue the justice of Hitler’s conquests and to profess trust in his promises,” they had become “hostage to any future moves by the German Chancellor.”⁵⁷ In terms of Tylorian opportunism, the Allies opened up chances for Germany at several junctures, before withdrawing and inviting Germany into exploitation - something which Germany could only interpret as an endorsement of her own policy. The Allies had lost much in return for a momentary peace, transferring their power and legitimacy in Europe to a nation that had never shown any inclination of deviating from her own expansionism. There is no indication that Herr Hitler ever had any intention of

⁵³ Herbert Asquith, “Vote of Credit, £100,000,000”

⁵⁴ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government.”

⁵⁵ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939.” *World Politics* 29, no. 3 (1977), 413
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2010003>.

⁵⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

⁵⁷ Sławomir, Narinsky, “The Causes of World War II,” 112.

honouring this new “system...built on feeble foundations.”⁵⁸ “They can conclude agreements, make declarations, as many as they like: I put my trust not in scraps of paper,”⁵⁹ said the German Chancellor after breaking the terms of the Munich Agreement in the Spring of 1939. Great Britain succeeded in almost completely destroying her own diplomatic position whilst doing very little in turn to thwart German aggression, which had been shown to work insofar as it fulfilled German aims. As the months steadily advanced towards the second and final violation of Czech sovereignty, Germany was encouraged in assuming and exercising her new power by the willing participation of the small states who, like jackals following a lion, began “advancing claims to Czechoslovak territory.”⁶⁰ Germany came in as peacemaker, seemingly commissioned by the Allied powers “to create a new order, not to destroy an old one.”⁶¹ It is easy to forget in the light of the following year that Germany and Poland had openly collaborated in the division of Czechoslovakia - that Polish threats of invasion had more than likely pushed Mr. Benes over the line. She was given her portion by Germany with the cession of Teshen. Much of the east came directly into the fold, with Germany signing accords in due course with Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Estonia and Latvia.

These were relationships of mutual benefit at best, and fear at worst. Mr. Benes, when asked why he had not sought a similar relationship with Germany, answered that the Powers of Europe only had to “wait slightly longer and we shall know how such agreements are going to help Poland and Yugoslavia.”⁶² Mr. Churchill was even more pessimistic, claiming that “the road down the Danube Valley to the Black Sea...had been opened” for Germany.⁶³ Having taken his

⁵⁸ Slawomir, Narinsky, “The Causes of World War II,” 112.

⁵⁹ Adolf Hitler, “Speech by Herr Hitler at Wilhelmshaven on April 1, 1939.” *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*. Accessed 5th March, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk20.asp>

⁶⁰ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 179. “Others, inspired by Germany’s example, were advancing claims to Czechoslovak territory...”

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 179

⁶² Edvard Benes to Radislav Rasin, “A Message to a Czechoslovak Politician in Prague”

⁶³ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government.”

opportunity, Herr Hitler saw no reason to afford the same to the Allies, recognising that he stood under no obligation to invite “English supervision or criticism”⁶⁴ in his future arbitrations, since after all the demand for them was coming from smaller surrounding states, who had appealed to Germany as the ‘de-facto’ court of appeal. German mediation could hardly be reproached, for in all outward appearances she was simply fulfilling the role that the Allies had taken up at Munich. It was no fault of her own, but of the Allies, for “the fact that the parties concerned...did not turn to the four Powers, but only to Italy and Germany.”⁶⁵ Explicit provisions that the Munich Agreement had made for such future revisions to be referred to further Four Powers conferences collapsed because smaller states simply saw no reason to appeal to the Allies any longer. Thus, in vouched support of Taylor’s historic rule, Great Britain and France were excluded not so much by German design as by the standards of aggressive power that they had set by their own mistakes; standards which Germany was simply bettering them in. Germany had never deviated from her unilateral line of expansion and yet now, against what anyone could rightly expect, she found herself in a largely unimpeachable diplomatic position heading into 1939.

In his criticisms of the Munich Agreement Mr. Duff Cooper argued that “with new methods and new morality they [His Majesty’s Government] have introduced a new vocabulary into Europe.”⁶⁶ Great Britain had surrendered the prerogatives she had assumed at Versailles on the expectation of peace, but now the language of peace, first laid down at Versailles, had been turned to the ends of German aggression. On the 28th September 1938 Germany had justified Hungarian claims to Czechoslovakia as a “practical realisation of the principle of self-determination.”⁶⁷ The principle of self-determination had been cited by the Allies to justify

⁶⁴ Adolf Hitler, “Extract from Speech by Herr Hitler to the Reichstag on April 28th, 1939” *Yale Law School - The Avalon Project*. Accessed 5th March, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk21.asp>

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Duff Cooper, “Personal Explanation to The House of Commons.”

⁶⁷ Edward, Chaszar. *Decision in Vienna: the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border dispute of 1938*. (Hunyadi MMK, Hamilton, Ont., 1991), 92

Czechoslovak cessions to Germany and was now being used by Germany to apportion areas of that beleaguered country to her neighbours, in what also happened to be a clear violation of the Treaty of Trianon. Cooper's "new language" was merely old language put to new ends. The Axis powers were well aware of "the significance of an Axis led arbitration"⁶⁸ as regards the "Vienna Award," whereby Czechoslovak territory was ceded to Hungary in November 1938. The Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano wrote to Herr Ribbentrop in jubilation at this "gigantic event" that would, echoing Mr. Churchill, show that "all Franco-British influence has collapsed forever in the Danubian and Balkan Europe."⁶⁹ Under the permissive authority of Germany other nations now simply pursued their own strategic ends as they saw fit, seeking land "with hyena like appetite"⁷⁰ from a Czechoslovak nation that lacked any means to resist. The Allies had created conditions for opportunistic action and this was being taken up by all and sundry. It is fitting that Namier should have described Munich as being both a "failure of European statesmanship" and a "failure of European morality."⁷¹ The statesmen's blunders had both created the opportunities and endorsed the means, and by allowing for German aggression in Czechoslovakia they signalled that other such aggressive actions would be met with similar rewards. Following the German example and, through Allied abdication, finding their better angels absent, the small states succumbed to the great original temptation - "*All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.*"⁷² Czechoslovakia was not thrown to a single wolf, but a pack of them. Amidst the feeding frenzy Germany stepped in as the great arbitrator of peace, determined to ensure, for the common good, that Czechoslovakia's 'inevitable' darwinian demise would be carried out in bloodless, civilised manner.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 53

⁶⁹ Ibid., 53

⁷⁰ Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 311.

⁷¹ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, ix

⁷² *The Holy Bible*, Mathew 4:9

In March 1939 the Slovakian Republic declared independence from the powerless rump of the Czechoslovak state and, in the name of self-determination, became a protectorate of Germany. On March 15th, 1939 Germany, at the behest of all Europe it would seem, invaded Bohemia and Moravia in the name of peace. The new system of diplomacy was built upon an Orwellian inversion of language: peace meant aggression, self-determination meant national subjugation. What answer could the Allies give to the final destruction of a state whom they had already once betrayed? The exposed impotence of Great Britain and the French Republic in this moment was a turning point for Russia, after which she began to favour “Berlin above London and a division of spheres of influence above hopes of collective security.”⁷³ The bonds of honour, the ‘sinews of peace,’ that had tied each nation to the post-war settlements had largely disintegrated. All things seemed in a state of flux. Any nation might seize an advantage or, by one wrong step, meet its demise. Raw power alone held currency amidst such anarchy, and in recognizing this fact Russia committed, in principle, no greater fault than could be laid at the doorstep of any other power.

The powerlessness of the Allies at this moment was complete and they were left clinging to the empty promises of the European dictators. In attempting to save face they found themselves politically covering for German and Italian aggression. In the case of the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Great Britain continued where she had left off from Munich several months before. Speaking in the Commons House Mr. Chamberlain argued that His Majesty’s Government had always recognized “a moral obligation to Czechoslovakia to keep the guarantee”⁷⁴ which had been given at Munich, but that its “position had altered since the Slovak

⁷³ Jonathan Haslam. “Review of Soviet-German Relations and the Origins of the Second World War: The Jury Is Still Out” *The Journal of Modern History*. No. 4 (1997): 787. Accessed 12th March, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1086/245594>.

⁷⁴ Neville Chamberlain, “Debate on Czechoslovakia.” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, 15th March, 1939. Accessed 5th March, 2024. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1939-03-15/debates/decaef89-5a58-4e3c-a7c6-e39563249418/Czecho-Slovakia?highlight=position%20altered%20since%20slovak%20diet%20declared%20independence%20slovakia#contribution-d5c5bb2b-165d-4cbd-aac0-42b7785c44c5>. *Speech Delivered at the outset of the motion “That this House do now Adjourn.”*

Diet declared the independence of Slovakia.”⁷⁵ In one fell swoop Great Britain excused herself from that solemn obligation she had given to the reformed Czechoslovakia, whilst tacitly blessing the German invasion by allowing for the farcical pretence of Slovakian independence, which was shown to be such by further Hungarian annexations of that new ‘state’ only days after the Wehrmacht had entered Prague. With the Italian invasion of Albania, Great Britain again appeared unwilling to admit the emptiness of her prior agreements. Conscious that this invasion appeared to contradict the Anglo-Italian Agreement of 1938 to “disclaim any desire to modify...the status quo as regards national sovereignty of territories in the Mediterranean area,”⁷⁶ Mr. Chamberlain could only answer that “nobody with any sense of responsibility can in these days lightly do anything which would lead to an increase of international tension.”⁷⁷ The German-Italian status quo, instated by the Allied blunders at Munich and formalised by the Pact of Steel in May 1939, held Axis and Allies to very different standards. Military escalation and threats of force were the decisive factors in the diplomatic scales, in which both Great Britain and France had been “weighed in the balance and found wanting.”⁷⁸ The Germans and Italians threw their military weight around the continent while the doting Allies trailed along behind, sighing and apologising for their unseemly behaviour, hoping against hope that the dictators might tire themselves out before too much more damage was done. This was seen especially in the case of the Anglo-Italian Agreement. His Majesty’s Government, in the vain hope that Mussolini might still exert some moderating influence on Herr Hitler, resolved to maintain an agreement guarding the ‘status quo’ even as Italy openly changed that status quo. This was

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Anglo-Italian Agreement” Signed 9th April 1937, reinstated 5th May 1938. Accessed 28th February, 2024. *The National Archives*. <https://discovery.national.archives.gov.uk/details/r/ce58c610-e097-492d-8466-518c7d3beaee>.

⁷⁷ Neville Chamberlain. “The European Situation” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, 13th April 1939. Accessed 28th February, 2024. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1939-04-13/debates/4b2dfe03-efc6-4c3c-adcd-83def7b00d23/EuropeanSituation?highlight=nobody%20with%20sense%20responsibility%20these%20days%20lightly%20anything#contribution-aefc5eed-4f91-40f5-9b04-13b6ecf7581a>.

⁷⁸ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government,” referencing *Daniel* 5:27.

justified by the vain hope that Mussolini might, in turn, help uphold the 'Pyrrhic Peace' of Munich.

Czechoslovakia fell, then Albania and then Memel in Lithuania, either through force or the threat of it. The Allied blunders had not merely allowed for Axis aggression; these blunders, going beyond Taylor's simple opportunism, actually set this aggression in place and almost demanded its continuation, so long as Germany could bring forward further grievances. The German Chancellor had secured the passivity or complicity of all Europe and, by thus isolating the Allies, he "no longer expected to make gains by parading his grievances against Versailles: he expected to make them by playing on British and French fears."⁷⁹ In that final year the redrawing of the map of Europe became commonplace and expected. Sbacchi argues that Munich had had the opposite of its anticipated effect in that it "convinc[ed] Hitler and Mussolini that they should move ahead with speed and more speed."⁸⁰ The Allies had abdicated their obligations to the Versailles Treaty at Munich in October and had passed the torch of arbitration to the ascendant Axis powers, to assess and redress the fractious national differences that had been left unanswered by the settlements of 1919. From the German viewpoint one might say that the perceived injustices of Versailles were being increasingly and ever more swiftly righted. Change was the fashion, correction the expectation. The issue of the Danzig Corridor seemed to arise quite naturally as a milestone that is perceived up ahead, slowly emerges into clearer view as other such markers that had once seemed closer recede thence into the distance behind. Danzig might be swept away on the march of change, part and parcel with all that had gone before.

⁷⁹ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 191

⁸⁰ Alberto Sbacchi, "1938: An appraisal of the diplomacy of appeasement," 594.

The British Rebellion

*“But yesterday and the word of England might have stood against the world: now none so poor to do her reverence, I use the words of a poet; but though it be poetry, it is no fiction. It is a shameful truth, that not only the power and strength of this country are wasting away and expiring ; but that her well-earned glories, her true honour, and substantial dignity, are sacrificed.”*⁸¹

Having slowly been lulled into a fitful slumber by an anaesthetic of “specious and plausible excuses”⁸² Great Britain came into a steady and gradual awakening. Such a moral epiphany cannot be expressed in the language of diplomacy, for indeed it somewhat transcends such concerns, bearing import to them only insofar it vindicates or confounds the actions and methods of statesmen. It is the decided opinion of more traditional and popular histories, and indeed it is largely the opinion of the present age, that this particular awakening spoke into the most glorious, the most vital and eternal animating forces of the human race, which are the domain not of history, but of heaven. As to the place where the slumbering Britain was to awake, Namier describes her diplomatic situation as one akin to a man who “had been tripped, had reeled and rolled down a pit; muddy and dazed, and uncertain how to emerge.”⁸³ In the months between Munich and the final fall of Czechoslovakia the appeasers within the British government “continued to execute their policy” even as there came “converging upon them in an uncoordinated ‘pincer-attack’”⁸⁴ those Parliamentarians who, through differing motives and causes, had nevertheless come to agree that the Munich Agreement had been “a disaster of the first magnitude.”⁸⁵ Hints of their growing influence could be seen in British policy; a strange hardening in resolve that had been entirely absent in the wasted years gone by, but which emerged now in what Alexandroff calls a “‘bulldog’ spirit-of

⁸¹ Earl of Chatham, “Debate in the Lords on the Address of Thanks” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, November 18th 1777.

⁸² Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government”

⁸³ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, xi.

⁸⁴ P.M Kennedy “Idealists and Realists: British Views of Germany 1864-1939,” 154

⁸⁵ Winston Churchill, “Policy of His Majesty’s Government”

blind determination”⁸⁶ This resolve was a long time coming and it was certainly not brought forth when Herr Hitler first began pushing the Polish Republic for concessions in the winter of 1938. Namier speculates that “had Poland accepted Hitler’s terms [at that point] she would have earned the gratitude and applause of the appeasers for saving them trouble.”⁸⁷ Nor had this resolve fully formed at the outset of the war. Even on August 29th Mr. Chamberlain proclaimed his hope that “German-Polish differences should be capable of solution by peaceful means.”⁸⁸ Indeed he expanded upon this to say that there were “no questions in Europe which should not be capable of a peaceful solution if only conditions of confidence could be restored. His Majesty’s Government are...always... ready to assist in creating such conditions.”⁸⁹

In spite of this diplomatic grogginess the attitudes of the political class still shifted to a colossal degree before September, 1939. It was the German dissolution of Czechoslovakia that put this in motion, perhaps because it showed so unequivocally how much power the Allies had given over to Germany and how truly empty Herr Hitler’s promises of peace had been. Yet, as Namier and Taylor agree, no obvious course of action presented itself - there was only the certainty that “in the aftermath of Prague, something had to be done.”⁹⁰ This new call to action was limited because His Majesty’s Government had ceded its conventional diplomatic tools to Germany. In standing fast by Poland she did not so much take the “road less travelled” as the road never before travelled. Taylor rightly describes the famed Anglo-Polish Treaty of 30th March 1939 as a “revolutionary event in International affairs.”⁹¹ It was indeed revolutionary, for

⁸⁶ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939,” 414

⁸⁷ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, xiii.

⁸⁸ Neville Chamberlain. “Danzig: British Position.” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives. 10th July, 1939. Accessed 5th March, 2024. [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1939-07-10/debates/d4796f1c-6768-4604-83a6-d842d77b10bc/Danzig\(British Position\)?highlight=should%20not%20capable%20peaceful%20solution#contribution-5d7b8e0f-5855-4f77-9ab4-876705512dc3](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1939-07-10/debates/d4796f1c-6768-4604-83a6-d842d77b10bc/Danzig(British%20Position)?highlight=should%20not%20capable%20peaceful%20solution#contribution-5d7b8e0f-5855-4f77-9ab4-876705512dc3).

⁸⁹ Neville Chamberlain, as quoted by Lewis Namier in *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, 290.

⁹⁰ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939,” 410.

⁹¹ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 215

only three years prior Great Britain had undertaken her first ever peacetime commitment to a European Power, and that was a defensive treaty with France. Only when “the means of organising any resistance to German aggression in Eastern Europe were now almost exhausted”⁹² and when every Eastern European state appeared either to have fallen beneath Germany’s sway or be left standing alone in resistance to Russian influence - only now did Great Britain elect to offer her guarantee to a nation with which she had little common cause, and who had “only six months before they joined the pillage and destruction of the Czechoslovak State.”⁹³ Great Britain, through action that was “hasty and ill-considered,”⁹⁴ sought something of a *tabula rasa* through decisive diplomacy, attempting to reset Versailles to the vigour and reverence it had known in 1919 and return herself to the high table of European affairs. In so doing she irrationally acted both against that system which had been established at Munich, under the auspices and logic of which she ought to have happily surrendered Polish territory to Germany in the name of peace, and she also acted against the grounds of her traditional policy, which would have balked at the idea of such risky and open ended foreign entanglements. In a state of self-induced and desperate paralysis, His Majesty’s Government was driven to an action that would otherwise “have been ruled out by strict military calculation.”⁹⁵ Great Britain was reduced to hanging a vague threat of conflict out over the continent that she had no power to fulfil, trying to engineer circumstances by which, in a departure from all previous actions, she could threaten to bring about a general war. Perhaps the thought of the Great War had come to mind; that notion of whether “the great catastrophe would have been avoided [if] Britain’s position had been made clear.”⁹⁶ On its face at least the guarantee to Poland was unequivocal. It was “an unprecedented

⁹² Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Rosetta Books, new York, 2010) 313

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 311

⁹⁴ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, xiii-xiv

⁹⁵ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939,” 407.

⁹⁶ Lewis Namier in *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, 304

about-face in its foreign policy” by which His Majesty’s Government sought to reverse its entire European policy in order to defend the status quo in Eastern Europe.⁹⁷ The clear lack of foresight and methodology lends itself to the notion that this was more of an intemperate moral decision, rather than a calculated diplomatic one. It was a fierce jab of righteousness into the face of frustration, unthinking as to how it might leave one’s flank open to a counter-blow. Nor did His Majesty’s Government halt at Poland: by June Lord Halifax was able to report that, in light of both Italian and German threats, the British nation was “bound by new agreements for mutual defence with Poland and Turkey” and had “guaranteed assistance to Greece and Roumania against aggression.”⁹⁸

Addressing this moral awakening in full, Taylor cannot nail down quite why this great reversal took place, attributing it to an “underground explosion of public opinion such as the historian cannot trace in precise terms.”⁹⁹ Whilst many have praised it, none have been able to explain it. Mr. Churchill may have come the closest, and can speak of something to its scale:

History, which, we are told, is mainly the record of the crimes, follies, and miseries of mankind, may be scoured and ransacked to find a parallel to this sudden and complete reversal of five or six years’ policy of easy-going placatory appeasement, and its transformation almost overnight into a readiness to accept an obviously imminent war on far worse conditions and on the greatest scale.¹⁰⁰

In his reference to “far worse conditions” Mr. Churchill laments how a far more favourable war than that which Great Britain invited over Poland might have been fought over Czechoslovakia. Yet this was the moment of Prodigal Britannia’s choosing, in which she said to herself, *“I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against*

⁹⁷ Dębski Sławomir and Mikhail M. Narinsky, “The Causes of World War II,” 115

⁹⁸ Lord Halifax. “Speech for the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs” 29th June, 1939. *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk25.asp>. “A year ago we had undertaken no specific commitments on the Continent of Europe, beyond those which had then existed for some considerable time and are familiar to you all. To-day we are bound by new agreements for mutual defence with Poland and Turkey: we have guaranteed assistance to Greece and Roumania against aggression.”

⁹⁹ Taylor, *Origins of The Second World War*, 208.

¹⁰⁰ Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 328.

heaven, and before thee.”¹⁰¹ One can only vaguely turn with Taylor to the groundswell of British public opinion as the source of this reversal, which invigorated budding political opposition to His Majesty’s Government and alerted the ministers of the day to the depth and breadth of the blunders they had committed. From whence did this groundswell come - from a people that had so rapturously greeted the shameful pact at Munich? That, again, is uncertain. It might well be that, to use the words of Arthur Hugh Clough, this unexpected flood had been “far back through creeks and inlets making,”¹⁰² only requiring a *casus belli* in order that it might make its presence known. Regardless, Great Britain awoke now as if for the first time to the desolate scene in Europe, to the dishonourable schemes she had erected upon the sacrifices of the Great War, and the powerless position which her present policies had placed her in. The prodigal resolved to return home, to restore her honour, no matter how poorly timed and ill advised that journey might be. Taylor in all his reasonableness is quite confounded by this, for after all “the occupation of Prague did not represent anything new in Hitler’s policy or behaviour... Yet British opinion was stirred in a way it was not at the absorption of Austria or the capitulation of Munich.”¹⁰³

This moral recovery translated to deep irrationality in a diplomatic sense, as it necessitated His Majesty’s Government to disown all its prior actions. In this desire to ‘return home’ Great Britain committed her final blunder, one of over-compensation, embarking upon her journey with poor preparation, traversing an unknown road with an indiscernible aim. Namier compares the government to bankrupt businessmen “trying to re-start a business: a procedure

¹⁰¹ *The Holy Bible*. Luke 15:18.

¹⁰² Arthur Hugh Clough, “Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth.”
*“For while the tired waves, vainly breaking
 Seem here no painful inch to gain,
 Far back through creeks and inlets making,
 Comes silent, flooding in, the main.”*

¹⁰³ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 208.

equally inadmissible in politics and in trade. Prestige, insight, and freedom of spirit are required in builders of coalitions: the Munichers were unfit for work.”¹⁰⁴ Through hurried alliances she attempted to undo all the precedents of her policy, seeking to revive the spirit of Versailles and re-inhabit the lifeless carcass of The League of Nations, proclaiming her will now to “Die for Danzig.”¹⁰⁵ However, in attempting to make a Belgium of Poland, in attempting to artificially draw red lines where days prior she would never have drawn them, Great Britain heaped absurdity atop absurdity. Why should she stand for Poland when, in a situation of identical essence, she had betrayed Czechoslovakia? This moral reversal was insufficient to wipe away the structures of Munich, the continuing life of which lay in German and Italian hands, and which prescribed the ‘correction’ of the Versailles settlement as the diplomatic tonic for European affairs. Further to this, and speaking within the confines of this ongoing system of correction, the claims that Germany put forward for Danzig held far more validity and plausibility than those which had been granted, nay endorsed and forwarded, by the Allies at Munich as regards the Sudetenland. The final British blunder might be summarised as follows: that she believed the erection of *fait accompli* in Poland would be sufficient enough of a threat to forestall German expansionism. Unfortunately, when placed in the long light of Munich and all the events that had passed in the following year, one cannot help but view this as the last desperate gamble of a nation with no cards left to play. Fundamentally, as Namier argued, His Majesty’s Government had bartered away all the credibility which might have been attached to its ‘plighted’ word.

Taylor observes that the British were “trapped not so much by their guarantee to Poland, as by their previous relations with Czechoslovakia.”¹⁰⁶ The language of the initial agreement in

¹⁰⁴ Lewis Namier in *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, 117

¹⁰⁵ Robert Hutchinson, “Misunderstanding Great Britain, 1939–1942.” *German Foreign Intelligence from Hitler’s War to the Cold War: Flawed Assumptions and Faulty Analysis*, University Press of Kansas, 2019: 23. Accessed 28th February, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbqs5qj.6>.

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*, 214.

April 1939 provided protection for Poland (and Great Britain) “in the event of any threat, direct or indirect, to the independence of either.”¹⁰⁷ This language had been utilised regarding Czechoslovakia by both Great Britain and France under the Munich Agreement, whereby they joined together in an “international guarantee of the new boundaries of the Czechoslovak State against unprovoked aggression.”¹⁰⁸ The issuing of a second guarantee, akin to the one which had been betrayed only days prior, seems an altogether discreditable course diplomatically, regardless as to what it might have meant in terms of moral recovery. The French betrayal of her existing alliance dating from 1924 must also be recalled here as a further contribution towards a lamentable pattern of Allied weakness and treachery. This ‘clear pattern of behaviour’ would doubtless have been the reading of Germany which, in keeping with every action she had thus far pursued, was even then weighing aggression against a Polish state that had proved uncompromising in its refusal of her demands. Having been so intimately involved in the destruction of Czechoslovakia, Poland had realised that making concessions to Germany would be unlikely to save her. Her preparation to fight was not predicated on the British guarantee, for even without it “Poland would have anyhow resisted German territorial demands or attempts to chain her to the Axis.”¹⁰⁹ The ‘necessity’ of this treaty rests more upon the decided opinion of posterity than it does upon any strategic need of the moment. This necessity does not directly concern Poland at all, but war itself. When at last Herr Hitler’s attentions came to centre solely upon that nation and all means of exerting power over him had fled the Allies through their own blunders, it became clear to Mr. Chamberlain that there was “no chance of expecting that this

¹⁰⁷ “Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland” Signed London, 25th August, 1939. *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*. Accessed 4th March, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk19.asp>

¹⁰⁸ “Munich Agreement” signed at Munich, September 29, 1938, between Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, xiii-xiv

man will ever give up his practice of using force to gain his will. He can only be stopped by force.”¹¹⁰

The Joining of War

*“Now who will stand at either hand and keep the bridge with me?”*¹¹¹

Herr Hitler had not blundered thus far. All that he had asked for he had received, and Germany had been transformed into the dominant militant power which he had long envisioned. Diplomatically there was little to separate the case of Poland from Czechoslovakia. The German Chancellor’s belief that “the two Western Powers would not go to war at all,”¹¹² as Taylor puts it, was not a blunder committed in a vacuum. After giving their guarantee to Poland and introducing the threat of general war into European affairs the Allies could not then convince Herr Hitler that this possibility was anything more than theoretical. The German blunder was never a ‘move’ conceived in response to Great Britain and France: it was simply the next point in that straight and undeviating line of aggression. The subjugation of Poland would have occurred in some complete form regardless as to what the Allies did - the only thing that could forestall it was somehow impressing upon Germany that she stood to lose more than she might have gained by such an action. It fell to the Allies to *make* Germany believe that unlimited and unequivocal war would inevitably occur the moment that the Wehrmacht rolled across the Polish border. This was something beyond the power of Great Britain and France, but, taking into account all that has been discussed, it seems overly simple, perhaps even dishonest, to simply chalk that failure up to Herr Hitler’s ‘irrationality.’ In the Munich structures that had indulged and legitimised his violence his assumption that “faced with yet another *fait accompli* in Poland, as they had been in

¹¹⁰ Neville Chamberlain, “Prime Minister’s Announcement,” UK Parliament - Hansard Archives, 3rd September, 1939. https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/sep/03/prime-ministers-announcement#S5CV0351P0_19390903_HOC_32

¹¹¹ Babington Macauley, *The Lays of Ancient Rome: Horatius*.

¹¹² Taylor, *The Origins of The Second World War*; “ 278. Hitler blundered in supposing that the two Western Powers would not go to war at all, his expectation that they would not go to war seriously turned out to be correct.”

the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, Britain and France would surely back down eventually”¹¹³ was not madness, but indeed it was the most reasonable, the most sound and sensible diplomatic conclusion that the German Chancellor could have drawn. The Allies had fallen so far that violence now seemed to be the safest bet and expansion the most natural and sure-footed diplomatic course. “We have no other choice” proclaimed Herr Hitler, “we must act. Our opponents will be risking a great deal and can gain only a little. Britain’s stake in a war is inconceivably great. Our enemies have leaders who are below average. No personalities. No masters, no men of action.”¹¹⁴ It was the inverse of 1914. In that time Great Britain had possessed a great will to fight but did not seem to express this with enough clarity - now in the case of Poland there was great clarity but a dearth of sincerity. The Nazis underestimated “both the ability and the will of the British government to wage war”¹¹⁵ and so opted for force over diplomacy. Herr Hitler “had evidently made up his mind to attack Poland whatever happened,”¹¹⁶ and there remained now only the question of when and how Germany should call the Allied bluff.

Alexandroff notes that Herr Hitler did take some precautionary measures, “swallowing his hatred and fear of “Bolshevism”” and conciliating Russia in order that he might “secure her abstention.”¹¹⁷ Without the possibility of Russian intervention the Polish Guarantee was made all the emptier, it being now entirely apparent to all that “England and France have undertaken obligations which neither is in a position to fulfil.”¹¹⁸ Danzig was the final great landmark in the German march towards ‘liberation.’ There was no material reason, to the German mind, as to

¹¹³ Robert Hutchinson, “Misunderstanding Great Britain, 1939–1942,” 20

¹¹⁴ Adolf Hitler, “Speech to Generals at Obersalzberg,” 22nd August 1939

¹¹⁵ Robert Hutchinson, “Misunderstanding Great Britain, 1939–1942,” 20.

¹¹⁶ Neville Chamberlain, “Prime Minister’s Announcement,” 3rd September, 1939.

¹¹⁷ Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939,” 414.

¹¹⁸ Adolf Hitler, “Speech to Generals at Obersalzberg,” 22nd August 1939. *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*. Accessed 3rd March, 2024. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/judpolan.asp>.

why this particular grievance ought not be remedied along with the rest. This was the mode of thought into which Herr Hitler had been led by Allied concessions, and no half-baked and contradictory promise to Poland was going to awaken him to the reality of what was about to occur. The manner of his success was his undoing. “A permanent state of tension is intolerable”¹¹⁹ said the German Chancellor, and between Polish obstinacy and Russian collaboration there was no object to breaking this tension but the Guarantee. This Guarantee simply lacked any credence when viewed in tandem with all that had come before it. Recognising this, Herr Hitler sought to give the British an avenue out of their obligations, such as they had found over Czechoslovakia. Using SS troops disguised as Poles to attack the Gleiwitz Radio Tower on the Polish-German border he staged the final act in a series of ‘provocations’ by which Germany was ‘forced’ to invade Poland. There was sufficient material here to escape an obligation, especially when recalling Mr. Chamberlain’s declaration that peaceful negotiations were still attainable only two days prior. It could be made to seem as though the Poles themselves had thwarted this chance for peace.

The German Chancellor was almost proved correct in his assessment of the Allies. The lingering influence of years of appeasement, that political ‘grogginess’, was still present in the British state when Germany invaded Poland on 1st September 1939. It was not until the 3rd that Great Britain and the French Republic resolved to follow through on their Guarantee. Thus it was upon that single outburst of moral, diplomatically irrational conviction that the Second World War was joined and Great Britain advanced in a “singularly halting manner” towards her “finest hour.”¹²⁰ Just as the fabled Briton “knew he would return, from Merlin's prophecy”¹²¹ so too did the “stroke of catastrophe and the spur of peril...call forth the dormant might of the British

¹¹⁹ Adolf Hitler, as cited by Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance in “Deterrence in 1939,” 114

¹²⁰ Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*, 394.

¹²¹ Anne Bannerman, *The Prophecy of Merlin*

nation”¹²² many centuries on. Perhaps indeed this was the moment of Arthur’s return, when at last the once and future King saw his country sink to her lowest dearth, assailed by forces at home and abroad, driven to the earth by the weight of her responsibilities and lost amidst the tumult of great events that had quite escaped her control. There remained only one choice, long denied by now starkly visible: to fight until extinction, or until victory was won. It ought not be forgotten, as too often it is, that it was Mr. Chamberlain who resolved upon this great undertaking for, as Mr. Churchill attested upon his death in 1940, when “all that he had worked for was shattered, there was no man more resolved to pursue the unsought quarrel to the death.”¹²³

The choice to invade Poland was a German error, but not a diplomatic one. As regards the weighing of possibilities, Germany could not have acted any better from her perspective. Far better to look at the pattern than at the anomaly when drawing one's conclusions. Far better to regard the British Guarantee as being part and parcel with the rest of her actions - empty bluster and meaningless words. These errors on both sides were brought about and induced by one another as they either responded to or sought to continue the line of aggression. They had the effect of producing those particular circumstances where general war was joined over the question of Polish sovereignty. The “erratic behaviour by the western powers,”¹²⁴ in particular Great Britain’s unwillingness to accept the system which she had established at Munich, created the possibility for war. Germany’s complacency within that system, by which she was reinforced in her expansionist ambitions, brought forth her own error. She unwittingly took up the gauntlet that the Allies had thrown down and sparked the conflict. The Taylorian distribution of

¹²² Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 512

¹²³ Winston Churchill, “Mr Neville Chamberlain,” Hansard, UK Parliament. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1940/nov/12/mr-neville-chamberlain>

¹²⁴ Henry Ashby Turner, “Continuity in German Foreign Policy? The Case of Stresemann.” *The International History Review*, 1979, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Oct., 1979): 510.

diplomatic responsibility, consistently invoked in tandem with Hitler's undeviating line of aggression, holds firm. Great Britain committed a series of diplomatic errors by pursuing a contradictory policy, rendered such first by moral failure and then by moral fortitude, which manufactured this singular scenario by which general war was joined over Poland in September, 1939. Germany, within the framework that the Allies built for her, never committed a diplomatic error. Instead she failed to realise the gravity of the change that was then occurring in the British nation, through which that flimsy, absurd moral guarantee to Poland was transformed, not perhaps in its substance but rather in its essence, into the means by which a state of war once again returned to the European theatre.

Bibliography

- “UK Parliament,” Hansard. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/>
- “Yale Law School,” Avalon Project. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>
- “United Nations,” League of Nations Treaty Series. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/Content.aspx?path=DB/LoNOnline/pageIntro_en.xml
- “Imperial War Museum,” Private Papers of the Imperial War Museum. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/documents>
- Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co, 2011.
- Taylor, AJP. *The Origins of The Second World War*. New York: Atheneum, 1983.
- Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Michigan: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Orwell, George. *A Collection of Essays: England your England*. London: Harcourt, 1945.
- Chaszar, Edward. *Decision in Vienna: the Czechoslavk-Hungarian border dispute of 1938*. Hamilton: Hunyadi MMK, 1991.
- Churchill, Winston. *The Gathering Storm* Rosetta Books: New York, 2010.
- Henig, Ruth., *The Origins of The Second World War 1933-1941*. Yorkshire, Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1995.
- Namier, Lewis. *Diplomatic Prelude 1938-1939*. New York, Howard Fertig, 1971.
- P.M Kennedy. “Idealists and Realists: British Views of Germany, 1864-1939.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975): 137–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/36790>.
- Dębski, Sławomir, and Mikhail M. Narinsky. “The Causes of World War II: Poland, the Soviet Union and the Crisis of the Versailles System.” *White Spots—Black Spots: Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations, 1918–2008*, 105–58.
- Alberto, Sbacchi, “1938: An Appraisal of the Diplomacy of Appeasement.” *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 46, no. 4 (184) (1979): 569–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42734407>.
- Alan, Alexandroff, and Richard Rosecrance. “Deterrence in 1939.” *World Politics*, 29, no. 3 (1977).
- Roger, Eatwell, “Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 4 (1971)
- Jonathan Haslam. “Review of Soviet-German Relations and the Origins of the Second World War: The Jury Is Still Out” *The Journal of Modern History*. No. 4 (1997)
- Henry Ashby Turner, “Continuity in German Foreign Policy? The Case of Stresemann.” *The International History Review*, 1979, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Oct., 1979).