

**Williamson Murray, 'Munich at Fifty', *Commentary*, 86, 1, July 1988, 25-30.**

**Debate 1: The extent of the success and/or failure of appeasement**

- 'The results were catastrophic', claims Murray of appeasement policy at Munich in September 1938.
- Significant here is Murray's vastly different view of Hitler (compared with A. J. P. Taylor), seeing him as wanting 'a limited war with Czechoslovakia' and uninterested in a settlement- appeasement was a policy, in other words, that could not have averted war.
- Murray's central argument is that Munich in particular (and appeasement policy more generally) was a strategic disaster for Britain and, indeed, that at the time none of Britain's policymakers even seemed to have considered things from a strategic perspective. He notes the enormous military asset that Sudeten Czechoslovakia offered Hitler (especially the Skoda Works) and the economic benefits. Even if appeasement had been to delay rather than avoid war, Murray has found no evidence to suggest that anybody in the British government seriously considered the benefits that additional time (after September 1938) might give the German military forces to prepare for war. Ultimately, at Munich claims Murray, 'the British gave away nothing less than the strategic balance of Europe'.
- In summarising Czechoslovakia's strategic value, Murray notes
  - Czech tanks equipped a third of the Panzer divisions, while four Waffen SS and four Wehrmacht divisions used Czech gear during the invasion of France in 1940
  - The Skoda Works would produce German military equipment up to 1945
  - The Germans traded Czech equipment for oil and other raw materials (which sustained the German economy to the conquest of Poland).
  - More generally, Czech occupied the centre of Eastern Europe, a position from which Germany could dominate the region 'diplomatically, economically and strategically'.
- Murray also underlines the failure of the appeasement approach by arguing that Britain would have been better to go to war in 1938 – when Germany's military forces, and especially its air force – were not prepared.
- Following Munich, up to March 1939 the British Government did not – despite its rhetoric – increase armament in any meaningful way.

**Brief biography of the historian (note the context in which he worked)**

- After graduating from Yale University with Honours in History he served in the US Air Force for five years, including tours to Vietnam.
- PhD in military-diplomatic history from Yale
- Based at Ohio State University since 1977 but his distinguished career has included temporary appointments at other universities and military academies.
- He has published dozens of specialist academic books on military operations, strategies and diplomacy.
- In 1984 Murray published *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939: The Path to Ruin*. He considered appeasement policy and sought to explain why European nations allowed Germany to gain a dominant strategic position in Europe.

**Factors that shaped the historian's interpretation**

- Murray wrote in a context of revisionism, in which historians suggested that 'Munich was only a symptom of larger trends in the world, presaging the collapse of British and French empires...'. Even if this is the case, argues Murray, Britain and French can be criticised for their short-sightedness: winning a war and losing an empire would be far better than losing a war and being completely dismembered.
- Murray approaches his subject from the perspective of strategic and diplomatic history; he is equipped to both analyse the diplomacy of appeasement and its strategic implications.
- Use of operational records, in particular those in Germany. Murray's use of Luftwaffe records, for example, challenged the revisionist view that had Britain gone to war in 1938 it would have faced a devastating aerial attack.
- **Political context:** Reagan Era (1980-88)
  - Massive increase in arms spending (\$1.6 trillion in five years) underlying Reagan's policy of confronting the Soviet Union more directly than his predecessors
  - Significant US military interventions include
    - Lebanon (1982-83)
    - Invasion of Grenada (1983)
    - Air strikes on Libya that were condemned by the UN (1986)
  - 1988 election- great divergence in foreign policy and continued defence spending geared towards confronting USSR
- Murray is motivated by what he perceives as 'a resurgence of the illusions of Munich' following the Vietnam war in the press and debates about foreign policy. He is disturbed by media commentary 'slanted toward the easy, soft assumptions of appeasement'. He clearly supports the Reagan administration's recent military interventions in Libya and Lebanon and the US's support for Israel against its Arab neighbours and the Palestinian movement. For Murray, the example of British appeasement in the 1930s justifies the use of military force in foreign conflicts if it is

### Debate 2: The origins of appeasement

- Although the article focuses on Munich it conceives appeasement as a long-term policy. Murray, indeed, argues that Munich encapsulated 'the blighted fruit of a decade of appeasement and surrender'.
- Murray challenges A. J. P. Taylor's view that German foreign policy in the 1920s was justified by its harsh treatment in the Treaty of Versailles. '...the Germans got off lightly indeed in 1919', he argues. Germany convinced 'gullible' British and American leaders that they had been unfairly treated and embarked on a vigorous re-armament program in 1933 that the world's leaders did not attempt to check.
- Although Murray criticises Chamberlain for the policy, he notes the culpability of others in the British government too. He notes, for example, how the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, emphasised the moral importance (even at the expense of strategic and economic factors) of conciliating Germany. In fact, the only dissention Murray notes in Churchill – a point that David Reynolds has demonstrated is a myth, as Churchill remained quiet about the policy before Munich in the hopes of securing reappointment to Cabinet.
- He also, however, singles out Chamberlain for particular criticism, characterising him as a PM who wanted to simply appease Germany and 'get on with the serious business of social reform in the British Isles'. Murray notes that, despite worst-case scenarios by the chiefs of the armed services, Chamberlain actually reduced defence spending in 1937. In contrast to Churchill, he does not characterise Chamberlain as morally weak but, rather, as a politician predominantly concerned with domestic policy and unwisely faithful in Hitler's goodwill.

necessary in meeting the USA's 'larger responsibilities in the world'.

- *Commentary* is a monthly magazine published by the American Jewish Committee. By the 1980s it had a reputation for taking a conservative political position on issues, especially those pertaining to the Arab-Israeli conflict (that is, it supported Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and Israel's efforts to defend itself from its Arabic neighbours). Murray's critique of revisionist literature and, more broadly, of non-interventionism in contemporary conflicts, suits this magazine's political perspective: it justifies the use of military force, rather than appeasement, to maintain the state of Israel.

### Critical Evaluation

- Murray's contributes to the literature by considering appeasement from a strategic perspective, as opposed to the focus on other factors (leadership, morality, economics etc.) that other historians of the orthodox and revisionist schools used to evaluate the appeasement policy.
- In this respect he convincingly demonstrates that appeasement, and especially the Munich agreement, left Britain strategically weak while boosting Germany's military and economic strength in Eastern Europe. This is a significant challenge to Taylor's claim that appeasement was a 'triumph' for British policy. While agreeing with Churchill and the orthodox view, it does so with greater authority, based on archival research, including in Germany.
- Nonetheless, Murray is not a partial observer. His conservative political views on US foreign policy and, in particular Israel, is clear and is likely to have influenced his interpretation of Munich. For Murray, the failure British appeasement offers a justification of US intervention in Middle Eastern and South American conflicts, and its confrontation of the USSR with military force.
- Murray's *Munich at Fifty* is, therefore, an interesting example of how historians (and politicians) use what they consider the lessons of Munich to criticise or justify contemporary foreign policy. It is an example of how an understanding of the past can come to bear on how we perceive current events.