

# **The British and the origins of the Second World War**

**by Phillip W. Weiss**

Based upon Churchill's memoir, *Memoirs of the Second World War* (abridged), the flurry of diplomacy between Hitler and the other so-called great powers can be accurately described as sordid. Bad-faith abounded as diplomats offered guarantees that they had no intention of honoring and didn't. Hitler took advantage of the general unwillingness to have another war, while Britain and France reneged on their obligation to enforce treaties so which they were signatories. Churchill offers a wealth of information about the events preceding the start of the war. He uses his book as vindication of his own position which put him at odds with most of British public opinion which was pacifist. Churchill is especially critical of Baldwin and N. Chamberlain. Anthony Eden's resignation as Foreign Secretary shook Churchill. Eden was one of the few high government officials who opposed the policy of trying to placate Hitler.

Churchill's memoirs reveal information previously unknown to me, e.g, the Stresa Conference, the British-German Naval Agreement, offers by Stalin and FDR to have conferences to settle matters, and British acceptance of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Churchill believes that Chamberlain, although motivated by good intentions, made many mistakes resulting in lost opportunities to curb Hitler. Churchill minces no words regarding his loathing of Hitler. Yet, he also acknowledges Hitler's successes in the art of the bluff as Hitler repeatedly placed German security at risk to achieve strategic goals, and won, e.g., decision to

re-arm, the re-occupation of the Rhineland, the invasion of Austria, the Munich Conference. British efforts to settle with Hitler ended abruptly in March 1939 when Hitler invaded what was left of Czechoslovakia. From that moment on, according to Churchill, British policy turned hostile to Hitler.

Now, Churchill was not the only person who sounded the alarm regarding the danger posed by Hitler. However, Churchill is critical of Britain's failure to take decisive measures to stop Hitler early on. Frankly, I believe that such a position is unfair. In hindsight Churchill is right. However, those in power did not have the benefit of hindsight, and to their credit, advocated policies to promote peace. Their policy could work if Hitler was truly open to negotiations. But Hitler had other plans, and negotiated settlements weren't part of them. In that respect British leadership failed to fully take into consideration Hitler's character. However, that is easier said today than in the 1930s when confronted with the task of trying to deal with a fanatic who now firmly in charge of a major country.

Chamberlain believed that he could settle matters amicably with Hitler. He was wrong, but to unduly criticize Chamberlain as being naïve is also wrong. Chamberlain, and Baldwin and MacDonald as well, pursued a policy based on wishes of the British electorate which was opposed to war - to a point. By annexing Czechoslovakia Hitler basically signed Germany's death warrant. But he didn't know that in 1939. Nor did anyone else know that at the time. What is obvious to us now was far from obvious then. Thus, for anyone, including Churchill, to suggest, even implicitly, as he does in his book, that British policy, and especially the wish to maintain peace at any cost was misplaced is using

history to promote a political point, whatever that may be. The fact is that the governments that Churchill writes about excluded him from their councils. Thus, Churchill writes to vindicate himself at the expense of those politicians who had rejected him. It was bad enough that Hitler was inciting another war.

It took a great deal of courage to resist responding in kind. Churchill wanted to respond in kind. He wanted to re-arm, he wanted to confront, he wanted to act, all in reaction to Hitler. That shows how powerfully Hitler had instilled himself into Churchill's psyche. For Churchill, it was personal. Churchill never met Hitler, never dealt with him directly, yet is critical of others who actually did meet Hitler. Would Churchill had done any better if he were PM? That is a matter for conjecture, something for the fiction writer to mull over. It's too bad that Churchill was ostracized by his own party, but was that due solely to policy differences? Was his position regarding Hitler so out of touch with the sentiment of the British public that he had to be excluded from the government? I doubt it. But Churchill wanted to take risks that no one else was willing to take, and for good reason: the stakes were peace or war, and nobody holding public office wanted the latter, so no one was willing to take such a gamble, except Churchill, and he was not in power, so it was easier for him to take such a position.

As far as I'm concerned, Churchill's argument that the Britain could have prevented the war by acting more decisively fails. It fails because it defies the fact that the British government did act decisively, just in ways that did not suit Churchill. The British were in constant contact with Hitler. Far from not acting, the

**British initiated several diplomatic schemes to come to terms with Hitler. That they all failed is another story. But to suggest, even implicitly, as Churchill does, that the British government somehow was complicit in Hitler's rise to power is absurd. They were trying to do with words what Churchill wanted to do with weapons. When finally, there Britain had no choice but to resort to the latter, the results were catastrophic. That's when Churchill re-emerged onto the political scene, after the fighting had started.**