

Munich—The Edge of War: Distorting the historical record

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4 February 2022

What took place in Munich in September 1938 remains of pressing relevance. Only last Sunday, seeking to facilitate a war with Russia, which would have catastrophic consequences for the entire world, Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a leading Democrat and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned: “We cannot have a Munich moment again. [Russia’s Vladimir] Putin will not stop with Ukraine if he believes that the West will not respond.” Over the decades, various political scoundrels have often used the conference held in the German city on the eve of World War II to justify their own skullduggery.

Munich—The Edge of War (now available on Netflix) deals fictionally with the events of 1938. The film contains a number of gripping scenes, but in the final analysis fails to do justice to what actually occurred. Based on the novel *Munich* by former journalist Robert Harris, the movie seeks to rehabilitate the reputation of British Conservative prime minister Neville Chamberlain, who has gone down in history as the “appeaser”—the man who allowed Hitler to invade Czechoslovakia as part of the Führer’s plan for a Third Reich embracing most of Europe.

Munich—The Edge of War is directed by German filmmaker Christian Schwochow, who has demonstrated his ability to artistically interpret important contemporary social and political developments, including the criminal activities of high finance (*Bad Banks*, 2018) and the threat of fascism in contemporary Europe (*Je suis Karl*, 2021). In line with his previous body of work, Schwochow has emphasised the role played by young people at moments of crisis in his new film.

The book and film concentrate on the four days leading up to and including the infamous conference held in Munich where Chamberlain, French president Édouard Daladier and Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini agree that Hitler can take over the Sudetenland, a portion of Czechoslovakia inhabited by a German-speaking population of several million. After the conference, Chamberlain returns to England, descends from his plane and waves a piece of paper signed by Hitler and himself, which the British leader claims is the Nazi dictator’s promise to work together to ensure that “all Europe may find peace.”

The film begins with a brief flashback to a garden party held at Oxford University in the early 1930s. A young German student, Paul (Jannis Niewöhner), is drinking to excess with his English student friend Hugh (George MacKay) and their mutual German-Jewish girlfriend Lenya (Liv Lisa Fries). After the revelry, the film moves forward six years to the Munich conference. Hugh has risen

in the ranks to become private secretary to Chamberlain (Jeremy Irons).

Meanwhile in Berlin, Paul is employed at the German foreign ministry and is plotting together with members of the nationalist-conservative elite and military who regard Hitler’s plans for war as misguided and likely to end in defeat. Leading the conspiracy to oust Hitler from power in the film is General Ludwig Beck. Both the film and the book draw on the so-called Oster Conspiracy (*Septemberverschwörung*, September Conspiracy) of 1938.

The real-life conspirators, led by Generalmajor Hans Oster and including Beck, were certainly not opposed to war, but judged Hitler’s military policy to be adventurist. The conspirators’ plan was to storm the Reich Chancellery, arrest or kill Hitler and restore the monarchy in the person of Prince Wilhelm of Prussia, grandson of Wilhelm II. Success for such a coup depended on firm opposition to Hitler’s takeover of Sudetenland from France and Britain.

When Chamberlain and Daladier conceded to all of Hitler’s demands in Munich, the wind was taken out of the sails out of the conspiracy, which came to nothing. Both the book and the film present the conspirators in a favourable light, and play down their reactionary plan for bringing back the monarchy.

Director Schwochow builds tension in the scenes depicting the attempts by Paul to re-establish contact with his former friend Hugh. Paul wants to use Hugh to obtain a meeting with Chamberlain in order to convince the British premier that any deal with Hitler is not worth the paper it is written on. Paul and Hugh have been able to gain the trust of Hitler and Chamberlain, respectively, and two scenes in which the German and British leaders expound their philosophies—Chamberlain’s alleged pacifism and Hitler’s contempt for the German people—are among the strongest in the film.

Paul and Hugh are convinced they can stop Chamberlain from signing the treaty by delivering him the minutes of a secret conference on November 5, 1937 at which Hitler revealed the full extent of his war plans. They risk their careers and lives to put the document in Chamberlain’s hands, who abruptly rejects its content and demands it be destroyed.

The scene confirms that Chamberlain was no pacifist, but rather a ruthless representative of British imperialism. An important motive for his appeasement policy was the defence of Britain’s colonial empire. A war against Hitler would have required the withdrawal of British colonial troops and inevitably triggered anti-

imperialist uprisings. As long as Hitler's expansionist plans were focused on Europe and targeted the Soviet Union, the British government was quite prepared to turn a blind eye.

In *Munich—The Edge of War*, Chamberlain knows what the Nazi leader is up to, but deliberately lies to the public in Britain and internationally. At the same time, he also disarms the resistance against Hitler—represented in the film by the hesitation of Paul who cannot bring himself to shoot the Führer (played unconvincingly by Ulrich Matthes) when he has the opportunity.

Schwochow's film ends with the return of the British delegation to a cheering crowd in England. Warned on the plane by members of his delegation that Hitler may break his word, Chamberlain snorts: "If he breaks his word, the world will see him for who he truly is! And it will unite the Allies. Might even bring the Americans on board. And if I'm made to look a fool, well, it's a small price to pay."

We then switch focus to his private secretary Hugh who, after his travails in Munich, tells his wife he is considering joining the air force because war is now inevitable. War has been delayed, he says, but the "PM's just given us a chance of winning the damn thing when it happens. It's quite some service when you think about it." The argument here is that Chamberlain has provided Britain a breathing space, making it possible for the country to prepare for war, unite the allies, including America, and win the conflict, with Britain playing the leading role.

In an interview with the *Guardian* headlined "Chamberlain was a great man," Harris describes the former prime minister as a "tragic hero." The film based on Harris' book ends with the patently false claim that Britain bore the main responsibility for the defeat of Germany in World War II. Before the credits roll this text appears: "The extra time bought by the Munich Agreement enabled Britain and her allies to prepare for war, and ultimately led to Germany's defeat."

According to Larry William Fuchser, author of *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement: A Study in the Politics of History*, the British premier "did nothing to prepare the British people for war" and was "the captive rather than the master of events."

A key member of the British delegation, who features as a character in Harris' book, was Frank Ashton-Gwatkin. Ashton-Gwatkin was a strong advocate of a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany and expressed the hope that following the Munich Agreement "an Anglo-German policy of economic co-operation" could flourish in a German-dominated Eastern Europe.

Both Harris' book and Schwochow's film fail to make any reference to the considerable and well-known support for the Nazis within sections of the British aristocracy, monarchy and political elite, who thoroughly approved of Hitler's ferocious anticommunism, his crushing of the German working class and his regime's aim of destroying the USSR.

Writers and filmmakers are entitled to offer their own interpretations of historical events, but that interpretation needs to involve some minimally honest and objective treatment of events and people.

The gross distortions of the historical record in *Munich—The Edge of War* prompted Austria's *Die Presse*, for example, to comment in a review: "But what happens to Chamberlain now?"

Perhaps *Munich* will bring about his popular rehabilitation. In any case, British cinema has now bathed in glory the less than heroic, slightly embarrassing eve of the war. Rule, Britannia!—at least on the big screen."

In previous articles the WSWS has noted British author Harris' antipathy toward Leon Trotsky. In fact, it was the great Russian revolutionary who offered the most trenchant explanation of Chamberlain's role in Munich and deserves the final word.

Trotsky analysed the Munich agreement from the standpoint of the rivalry between the "warring imperialist camps." He opposed the efforts of Social Democracy and Stalinism in particular to paint France, Britain and the US as "innocent, peace-loving democracies" engaged in a "defensive war" with "fascist aggressors."

Only 10 days after the Munich conference Trotsky wrote that the issue for Hitler was "not at all a question of 'unifying Germany' as an independent task, but of creating a broader European drill-ground for future world expansion. The crisis over the Sudeten Germans, or rather over the Sudeten mountains, was an episode on the road toward the struggle for colonies." He warned that world war was inevitable if not stopped by the working class and that a "new partition of the world is on the order of the day" ("A Fresh Lesson—On the Character of the Coming War").

Trotsky returned to the theme once again in the "Manifesto of the Fourth International on Imperialist War and Proletarian Revolution" (May 1940): "The initiative for the new re-division of the world this time as in 1914 belonged naturally to German imperialism. ... The Munich agreement, through which Chamberlain hoped to seal a long-time friendship with Germany, led, on the contrary, to a hastening of the break. Hitler could expect nothing more from London—further expansion of Germany would strike at the life lines of Britain herself. Thus the 'new era of peace' proclaimed by Chamberlain in October 1938 led within a few months to the most terrible of all wars."



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