



Andrew David Stedman, *Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany*
Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany by Andrew David Stedman

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national sentiment both to be figments of the progressive imagination. He was disabused of the latter notion when the Euphrates Rebellion erupted in July 1920, requiring another expensive and sanguinary British colonial campaign to bring under control. The rebellion did at least have the effect of taking the wind out of the sails of the remaining enthusiasts for an extensive and open-ended British commitment to Iraq. The temporarily under-employed ex-monarch of Syria, Faisal ibn Hussein, was briskly installed as king of Iraq, a national assembly and rudimentary army established, and the new British priority defined as the liquidation of the mandate and the winding-up of an unprofitable colonial enterprise as quickly and cheaply as possible. Iraq was launched in 1932 on its uncertain course as a sovereign state, carrying with it a host of problems—not least among them, the future of its Kurdish population—that the British had failed to resolve and sometimes even to grasp.

A combination of military and political history, based almost entirely on English-language sources (only a single non-English reference appears in the bibliography or the footnotes), *Desert Hell* contains few startling new revelations. Its considerable strengths lie elsewhere: it is an accomplished work of synthesis; a vivid reconstruction of what, nearly half a century after A. J. Barker's pioneering work on the subject, remains a "neglected war"; and a sobering reminder of the often momentous consequences of decisions lightly and impulsively taken—or too long deferred. Some of Townshend's interpretations, certainly, are open to debate. The conduct of Ottoman leaders—whose treatment of their British prisoners seems all too consistent with their genocidal record in Armenia—and the part played by the author's namesake both at Kut and while in captivity receive kinder treatment here than, arguably, the evidence will fully support. Nonetheless, while it requires a definite mental effort on the reader's part not to view the subject matter of this book through the prism of today's newspaper headlines, one of the most impressive attributes of *Desert Hell* is the evident care taken by its author to avoid reductionist or presentist interpretations. As a result, it is likely to stand the test of time far better than any of the large number of ideologically engaged and polemical discussions of similar themes that have appeared in print since 2003. Undergraduates, academic nonspecialists seeking a reliable and scholarly introduction to the subject, and general readers alike should benefit greatly from reading it.

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Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany.

By *Andrew David Stedman*.

London: I. B. Tauris, 2011. Pp. x+308. £59.50.

The scholarly debate about appeasement in the 1930s and about Neville Chamberlain continues on. British historian Andrew Stedman contributes yet another study defending Chamberlain's prewar policies toward Nazi Germany. It is hard work, but the author does his best, drawing upon an impressive variety of English-language archival sources listed in a regrettably unilingual bibliography. His book is highly Anglocentric, as the reader will at once notice when Stedman writes, in the preface to *Alternatives to Appeasement*, that Winston Churchill, was "the man who defeated Hitler" (vii). Stedman's declaration will come as a surprise not only to Americans who assume that the United States was the

indispensable ally in World War II but also to Russians who believe, with better evidence, that the Red Army played the leading role in the destruction of the Nazi *Wehrmacht*.

Stedman divides his study into six chapters examining various policy alternatives of the British government during the 1930s. These include pacifism and isolation, economic and colonial appeasement, the League of Nations, alliances, war and the threat of war, and armaments and defenses. He wants to show that the only realistic policy Britain could follow was the one pursued by Chamberlain.

Pacifism and isolation were not a serious option, because British defense policy depended on the security of the English Channel ports. Like it or not, Britain had to defend France, Belgium, and Holland in its own national security interests. Economic and colonial appeasement was another alternative and meant the possible cession of African colonies to Hitler or consent to Nazi economic domination of Central and Eastern Europe. Stedman mentions that some Africans objected to being handed over to Hitler, but the author does not say much about East Europeans or Soviet citizens who might also have objected to Nazi “spheres of influence” (63) in their neighborhoods. The idea, of course, was to persuade Hitler to “behave more amicably” (45).

There was also the option of working through the League of Nations—an option in which Chamberlain had little interest except as subterfuge to escape alliance obligations, notably to the Soviet Union. Stedman sees “huge alliance systems” as ineffective and unpopular. More “limited arrangements” (126) were the Stresa front of Britain, France, and Italy and the Franco-Soviet pact of mutual assistance (both concluded in 1935). “Limited” is the least one could say: Stresa was stillborn and the Franco-Soviet pact an empty shell, though not because of any Soviet doing. Seen from Moscow, the pact with France was the first step in a longer process of coalition building against Hitler. Unfortunately, the French government gutted the pact of substance. Many Foreign Office officials also opposed it and barely tolerated even the empty shell.

The other big idea was Churchill’s proposition in 1938 for a “grand alliance.” Here is another example of Stedman’s Anglocentricity, since it was the Soviet commissar for foreign affairs, Maksim M. Litvinov, who in 1933–34 developed the concept of a broad-based anti-Nazi alliance, wanting to resurrect the World War I anti-German coalition, including Italy. It is true that alliances were unpopular, as Stedman notes, which is why Litvinov always spoke in public about “collective security” to preserve the peace. In private, Litvinov was far more direct about the Nazi danger.

Stedman asks rhetorically whether an anti-Nazi alliance would have deterred Hitler (120). This is the wrong question: deterrence could only be phase one of such an alliance; phase two would be the Allied military capacity and willingness to defeat Nazi Germany in war, should deterrence fail. Alliances could cause war, said the British government, and a European war could precipitate socialist revolution. Stedman appears to agree with the first premise, but he does not address the second under his final rubric “war and the threat of war.” Needless to say, belief in these assumptions played into Hitler’s hands.

Stedman reports Labourite Hugh Dalton’s interesting comment that politicians, especially on the Right, “would rather lose a war without Soviet assistance than win one with it” (148). The Anglo-French elite—with exceptions, of course, though not including Chamberlain—appeared to fear victory more than defeat. In this context, Stedman discusses the unsuccessful 1939 Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance negotiations, which failed because of Soviet “duplicity” and “intransigence” (122). If ever pot called kettle black, this is it. The accusations of Soviet bad faith came ill from committed appeasers, whom the author cites and endorses, but are a caricature of the actual negotiations.

Was an alliance with the Soviet Union really necessary? Were there other, better alternatives? Contemporaries had a good source at their disposal for resolving this question: *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's best-selling blueprint for German conquest. Oddly, Stedman scarcely notices this book, which was an iconic possession for many Germans. Litvinov read it and often raised the subject with German as well as Western diplomats. With the former, it was to mock their professions of peaceful intent; with the latter, to warn of the Nazi danger. In September 1938, British opposition leaders asked Chamberlain in the midst of the Czechoslovak crisis if he had read *Mein Kampf*. Chamberlain replied irritably that he had but that he had met Hitler and considered him an "honourable man" with whom he could negotiate (Ivan M. Maiskii, *Dnevnik diplomata*, 3 vols. [Moscow, 2006–9], 1:284–85).

The words of Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under secretary sacked by Chamberlain (in December 1937), make a nice juxtaposition to those of the prime minister. Like Litvinov, Vansittart warned early on of the Nazi danger. "With every month that passes," he wrote in early 1935, "I obtain more evidence that confirms my suspicions & convictions as to Germany's ultimate policies & intentions. I think they will soon become evident to all but the biased and the blind" (C1076/55/18, National Archives of Great Britain [Kew], FO 371 18825). Chamberlain was prime minister and Vansittart a civil servant, so in the argument over Hitler's intentions and what to do about them, there was no question of who would prevail. In hindsight, one can see who was right, although Stedman finds the foresight of "anti-appeasers" to have been exaggerated (234).

The author focuses narrowly on the period from March 1938 to March 1939, which he marks by three watershed events: *Anschluss*, the German absorption of Austria; the Munich agreement; and the disappearance of rump Czechoslovakia. These events opened everyone's eyes—Chamberlain's, too—and thanks to the prime minister's efforts, Britain was sufficiently prepared to survive the early stages of the war. In another manifestation of Anglocentricity, Stedman points to the Spitfires and Hurricanes that were built with the time purchased at Czechoslovak expense by the Munich agreement (201). These fighter planes were crucial in the Battle of Britain, that is true, although not in the Battle of France, as Stedman omits to stress.

If the Soviet Union is a tenebrous "other" in this book, France is a whining, unreliable ally. Stedman fails to emphasize the importance of France to British security, nor does he discuss the lamentable state of readiness of the British army, perhaps because Chamberlain would have had to take some responsibility for it. The gadfly Vansittart was appalled that Britain could send only two divisions to France at the outset of war. This derisory contribution to the common defense could not satisfy the French, who would have to bear the brunt of fighting and casualties on the ground, "in the brown" (as Vansittart put it), while the British fought "in the blue," in the sky and on the seas, where casualties would be insignificant by comparison (C358G & C940G/281/17, National Archives of Great Britain [Kew], FO 371 22922).

It thus requires a narrow focus, blank spaces, and legerdemain for the author to build his case. Like a good solicitor, Stedman advances vigorous arguments, based on solid research in British archives, in favor of his client. He joins other historians who have sought to rehabilitate the principal bull's-eye of antiappeasement critics and scholars. Stedman will not convince them, but "revisionist" defenders of Chamberlain's foreign and defense policies will no doubt welcome another aggressive advocate to their ranks.

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