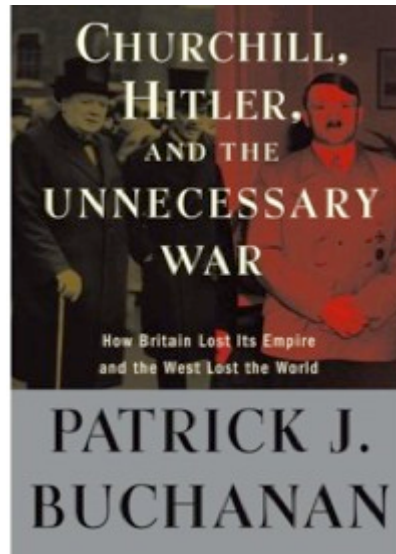




A Necessary History Lesson

Pat Buchanan's new book *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World* defies one of the unstated rules of American historiography, according to which all major questions about World War II are already decided and all discussion of that war is to occur in a giant echo chamber. Even to wonder whether there might have been an alternative to 50 million deaths and Soviet domination of eastern Europe, which the war yielded us, is a sure sign that you are straying from allowable opinion. This was the "good war," and that's that.



Buchanan's natural curiosity is a poor fit for the intellectual straightjacket everyone is expected to don in discussions of World War II. Was the war inevitable? Could it have been the war that made the Holocaust possible? Did Hitler, who ruled a country the size of Washington and Oregon, seek to "rule the world"? Was Winston Churchill really a great man conservatives should admire? The questions themselves strike us as jarring, so infrequently are they posed, but they are serious questions all the same, and Buchanan offers intriguing and well-crafted answers.

To be sure, Buchanan has given us more than just a history of the 1930s and the early years of World War II: he takes us through the First World War as well, from the bungled diplomacy that led to the war all the way through the bungled peace that ended it. His work here is important and provocative, especially since neoconservatives can still be found who defend U.S. involvement in that war. He explains carefully and persuasively how Germany's treatment in the Treaty of Versailles, which contradicted the principles on which Woodrow Wilson had promised peace would be based, was tailor-made for the future success of Hitler and his politics of revenge. But it is Buchanan's discussion of the years directly leading up to World War II that have attracted immense controversy.

Munich, not surprisingly, gets its own chapter. In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain agreed at Munich to allow Hitler to absorb the Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia in which some three million Germans resided — a move often regarded thereafter as appeasement to evil. The conventional wisdom today that Germany ought simply to have been smashed in 1938 is superficially plausible. But not only was Britain unprepared for such a war and France uninterested in one (now seeing her Eastern allies as liabilities), any such conflict would have done nothing to ensure long-term peace: the cycle of a punitive settlement and a revenge-seeking Germany would simply have started all over again. Germany had to be reintegrated into European life somehow and at some point.

Nevertheless, the comic-book version of this episode has dominated public discourse on foreign policy in America ever since. Every inept and impoverished Third World dictator who disturbs Washington, D.C., is promptly elevated to Hitler status, and a refusal to lay waste to his country derided as cowardly appeasement. With comic-book Munich lurking in the background, rational discussion of foreign policy becomes impossible. That seems to be the point.



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on July 28, 2008

When Hitler went ahead and absorbed Czechoslovakia proper, Chamberlain was humiliated. Now he would stand up to Hitler, wherever the German dictator made his next move. That next move would be in Poland, where in addition to transit rights across a “Polish Corridor” born at Versailles that severed East Prussia from Berlin, the outstanding issue was Danzig, a historically German city whose population was 95-percent German. Danzig had been jointly administered by Poland and the League of Nations since World War I but was clamoring for return to its ancestral home.

Poland was not an easy place to draw a line against German aggression. British diplomats and politicians had long considered the return of Danzig to be among the Germans’ most reasonable demands. Moreover, Britain was in no position to make good on any guarantee it might offer if Germany should declare war on that country. As historian Paul Johnson put it, the power to invoke the war guarantee “was placed in the hands of the Polish government, not a repository of good sense. Therein lay the foolishness of the pledge: Britain had no means of bringing effective aid to Poland yet it obliged Britain itself to declare war on Germany if Poland so requested.”

According to Buchanan, the war guarantee amounted to “empowering a Polish dictatorship of colonels that had joined Hitler in dismembering Czechoslovakia to drag the British Empire into war with Germany over a city, Danzig, the British thought should be returned to Germany.” Not exactly an act of genius — and in fact roundly condemned by many British statesmen and writers at the time — but one that has evaded serious scrutiny for nearly seven decades, so sacrosanct is the official narrative of World War II.

Even Winston Churchill, who initially supported the war guarantee with enthusiasm in 1939, had become more muted within just a few days. He wrote publicly, “There is ... no need for Great Britain and France to be more Polish than the Poles. If Poland feels able to make adjustments in the Corridor and at Danzig which are satisfactory to both sides, no one will be more pleased than her Western allies.” In his official history in 1948 he described the war guarantee as “a decision taken at the worst possible moment and on the least satisfactory ground, which must surely lead to the slaughter of tens of millions of people.”

For Buchanan, the missed opportunity to keep Hitler in check had come in 1935, when the German leader re-militarized the Rhineland in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler was full of trepidation as he carried out his plan, ordering his troops to retreat at the first sign of French intervention. None came, and Hitler had triumphed without firing a shot. Here, says Buchanan, was an opportunity for France, with a far superior military, to have taken a stand.

Although Buchanan is not exclusively concerned with entertaining contrary-to-fact scenarios, he is interested in considering whether the deaths of 50 million people might have been avoided by more astute diplomacy, and indeed whether many of the Jews who perished under Hitler might have been spared. Instead of offering a reckless war guarantee to Poland, he argues, it would have made more sense for Britain to draw a realistic, defensible line in the West that Hitler could not cross without risking war. There was nothing morally elevated about giving Poland a war guarantee on which Britain could not possibly deliver, thereby encouraging Poland on a diplomatic path that guaranteed its annihilation. (Eventually, this eastern European country — whose freedom had supposedly motivated British policymakers to go to war — found herself being hectoring by Churchill to make concessions to Stalin, winding up firmly in the Soviet orbit.)

Such a realistic policy would also have made the Jewish populations of Europe much more secure. “With no war in the West,” Buchanan argues, “all the Jews of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium,



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Luxembourg, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece might have survived a German-Polish or Nazi-Soviet war, as the Jews of Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland survived.” But because of the war guarantee to Poland and the resulting declaration of war on Germany, by June 1941 “Hitler held hostage most of the Jews of Western Europe and the Balkans.”

Buchanan’s argument hinges on his claim that Hitler had had no intention of going to war in the West, and for the meat of that argument I direct the reader to the book itself. But instead of avoiding impossible commitments and instead of re-arming and awaiting events, Britain set in motion a catastrophe that concluded with Stalin in control of half the continent. “Was it worth 50 million dead,” wonders Buchanan, “so Stalin, whose victims, as of September 1, 1939, were 1,000 times Hitler’s, could occupy not only Poland, for which Britain went to war, but all of Christian Europe to the Elbe?” No one is allowed to ask that question or anything like it, which is why Buchanan’s book has been met in all the usual quarters by smears and hysteria.

Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War is more than just a history lesson. Buchanan describes it as “a cautionary tale, written for America, which is treading the same path Britain trod in the early 20th century.” The United States has been handing out war guarantees all over the globe — most recently to Georgia, the old Soviet republic. Americans are thereby committed to war if Russia and Georgia should come to blows. What kind of statesmanship is this? “If two or three of the IOUs we have handed out are called in,” Buchanan warns, “the bankruptcy of U.S. foreign policy will be exposed to the world.”

In every key particular, in other words, the United States with her imperial overstretch is going the way of the British Empire. And few in public life have either the intelligence or the courage to point it out.

A review of this length cannot do justice to the sophistication of Buchanan’s argument, which is based on a remarkable knowledge of the source documents and the secondary literature. But it is one of the most important books of the year, and of the past 10 years or more. Many people who normally pride themselves on their skepticism of the conventional wisdom have a reflexively conventional view of World War II. By inviting us to rethink what we thought we knew, this book lands an important blow both for historical truth and the long-term health of the United States.

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