

Book Review

“The Appeasers”

By Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott

By: Stephen McCarthy

For: Peter Gibbon & Gary Hylander

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I. Why I selected this book?

In all the years I have taught World History the most exciting point for me and the most engaging for the students is the period between World War I and World War II. The Treaty of Versailles, The Great Depression, the rise of fascism and extreme nationalism are enough to get even the slackers a reason to get their heads off the desk. The one area though that I have never spent enough time on though is the appeasement of Hitler as a Cause of World War II. I have taught that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain caved in to Hitler at Munich, went home touting “peace for our time” and has since been viewed as the world’s all time “village idiot”. I tell the students no one but no one wants to ever be compared to Neville Chamberlain because you are being called the ultimate fool or “wuss”. It is as popular as being compared to Benedict Arnold except even Arnold has his supporters who say he was trying to do the right thing for the colonies.

But how could Chamberlain be so foolish? Did he not have people around him that could set him straight? I realize the taste of World War I was fresh in Europe’s mouth but how could anyone ignore the incredible military buildup in Germany in the 1930’s? How could anyone not see the goals of Hitler and fascism?

This what I never really understood about the World War II appeasement process and what I wanted to learn.

II. Authors

Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott were young historians at Oxford in 1963 when they co-wrote "The Appeasers".

Martin Gilbert has written over 80 books including ones on World War One, World War Two and The Holocaust. He also published twelve historical atlases on countries such as Russia, The United States and Britain. In 1968 he became the official Winston Churchill biographer. He is an Honorary Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, and a Distinguished Fellow of Hillsdale College, Michigan. He once said about his writing:

"In my own published work, I have avoided the word "perhaps". It is for the historian either to say what happened, or to say that he cannot discover it. To say, "Perhaps it was like this" is to mask a failure to get to the bottom of a problem: and failure in historical research is no crime. It is one of the hazards of the profession."

Richard Gott after writing "The Appeasers" later became a journalist and was senior editor at the Guardian newspapers. Since writing "The Appeasers" much of Gott's work has concentrated on Latin America issues. Today Gott is an honorary research fellow at the Institute for the Study of the Americas at the University of London.

III. The Authors' Thesis

Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott have 4 points to their thesis in "The Appeasers"

1) After World War One virtually no one in Neville Chamberlain's government or The Conservative Party wanted any part of another major war.

This is not a revolutionary theory. Practically no one In Europe {other than Hitler} or in The United States wanted to be involved in such a war. Therefore the Chamberlain government would do anything, say anything and look the other way to appease Hitler.

2) Many people throughout Britain thought that Germany was mistreated by The Treaty of Versailles and Hitler was due some slackness.

Again this is something that has been discussed thousands of times. Most people knew in retrospect that The Treaty of Versailles went too far and created an environment to produce a Hitler. The part of this piece of the thesis that is surprising is when it relates to the third thesis of the authors.

3) The world and especially Britain, Europe were well aware early on regarding Hitler's treatment of the Jews and they were okay with it (or at least were not going to get involved with it) because of their own anti Semitism.

This point was surprising to me. I always thought the insane treatment of the Jews by Hitler was something that came out, for the most part, after World War II. Gilbert and Gott make it clear that people in the British government were told early in the Hitler regime how he was treating Jews and the Chamberlain administration had a good idea of what Hitler's long term intentions were with the Jewish people.

Sir Harry Rumbold was the British Ambassador in Berlin when Hitler came to power. Of Rumbold, Sir Robert Vansittart said "little escaped him and his warnings were clearer than anything we got later". Rumbold reported that Jews were systematically removed from their posts" in public service. Disabilities were more "the accident of race". Rumbold noted:

"The departure from Germany of so many writers , artists, musicians and political leaders has created for the moment a kind of vacuum, for whatever may have been the shortcomings of the Democratic parties, they numbered among their following the intellectual life of the capital and nearly all that was original and stimulating in the world of art and letters"

Rumbold wrote this on March 15, 1933 in a letter to Sir Robert Vansittart and followed up in April of 1933 in another letter "large concentration camps were being established in various parts of the country."

Why do Gilbert and Gott think these warnings about treatment of the Jews went unheeded? One reason they say was because many in Britain agreed with Hitler. Lord Londonderry, a previous British Minister for Air wrote in 1936 "As I told you, I have no great affections for the Jews. It is possible to trace their participation in most of these International disturbances which have created so much havoc in different countries."

The British scholar Gilbert Murray got a letter from a friend of his which said "as for the Jews, I begin with no aprioristic ideas on this point; but experience has more and more taught me that they are in some peculiar and exceptional way a pernicious element in any country of the West... I understand perfectly the German attitude towards these people and I approve fully."

4) Chamberlain and his inner circle went into isolation listening only to themselves and their own points of view.

The last thesis of the authors is that the Chamberlain administration only listened to themselves. There were other opinions from British leaders on dealing with Hitler, urging the Prime Minister to be more aggressive but these voices went unheard.

Sir Eric Phipps who replaced Rumbold in Berlin had a different view of the Nazis than his predecessor. Phipps impression was that Hitler "may possibly respond to some rather theatrical personal appeal to his emotions". In October, 1934 Phipps met General Goring at a dinner party just a few months after the Rohm-Putsch purge that killed over 100 people who were deemed political threats to the Nazis. It was general public opinion at the time that these murders happened under the direction of Goring. When Goring arrived late to the dinner party he apologized to Phipps saying "I've been shooting" and Phipps replied "Animals this time I hope". Over 100 killed in a political purge and to some British leaders it was a punch line to a joke.

One other example of British tolerance for the Nazis is shown by the authors with stories dealing with Lord Halifax. Halifax was appointed in 1935 as war secretary. In his first meeting with Goring Lord Halifax said "I was immensely interested in meeting the man. One remembered all the time that he had been connected with the 'clean-up' in Berlin on June 30, 1934, and I wondered how many people he had been responsible for getting killed." In 1936 Halifax paid his first visit to Nazi Germany. A friend of his reported after the visit " "He told me he liked all the Nazi leaders, even Goebbels, and he was much impressed, interested and amused by the visit. He thinks the regime absolutely fantastic." This was the leadership of Britain in the 1930's. Not exactly Profiles in Courage.

IV. Do the Authors Prove Their Point?

With a thorough review of the 1930's developments, dealing with events step by step and by relating personal stories of the people involved I think the authors do prove their thesis. One example of this is their description of The Munich Conference:

- Chamberlain took with him just 4 of his aides and they were all in full agreement with him
- Chamberlain made an attempt to bring the Czechs to the table. Hitler refused and that was the end of the discussion.
- Toward the end of the meeting Chamberlain said to Hitler " he hoped there would be no killing of women and children by attacks from the air" as if other forms of killing of women and children, say by tanks, might be alright. (Just the fact that Chamberlain brings up the possibility of Czechs being killed makes one wonder if he knew, even in Munich, that he had been taken.)
- Hitler responded to Chamberlain's statement above by saying: "he would always try to spare the civilian population and confine himself to military objectives. He hated the idea of little babies being killed by gas bombs". By September of 1938 the world had seen and heard enough about Adolf Hitler that everyone should have known this last statement was ludicrous.

V. What Have I Learned?

The two main points I have learned from "The Appeasers" are:

1) The level of anti-Semitism within Britain and most likely most of Western Europe was much greater than I ever realized. I would like to study further the status of Jews in Europe between World War I and World War II. I knew Jews were resented in Germany because to a large extent they controlled banks and business when the depression hit and therefore got the blame.

I was surprised that the authors pointed out that this hatred existed in Britain too. If it was in Britain where else was it? This I would like to study further. It will have an impact on my teaching of World War II.

2) The other point I learned was that as a leader Neville Chamberlain was completely ineffective. I don't say this because of the manner he was duped at Munich. I say it because the whole process leading up to Munich was ineffective leadership by Neville Chamberlain. Unlike someone like JFK and the Cuban Missile Crisis where John Kennedy made sure he got all points of view especially those that disagreed with him, Chamberlain surrounded himself with Yes-Men and distance himself from all those who might question his moves. A true leader wants to be questioned and is not afraid to hear other arguments. A true leader does not get hung up on ego and always want to be the smartest person in the room. A true leader is confident enough to surround him or herself with brighter people. Chamberlain was an incompetent leader and luckily Britain had a great leader waiting in the wings.

VI. What I Will Incorporate Into My Teaching Unit

In the past when I have taught World War II when the question arises why did the world look the other way when Hitler was making his moves I have said there were 4 reasons:

- 1) The world was tired of war after World War I and they would do anything to prevent another
- 2) Europe and The United States for the most part had their eyes on The Soviet Union because they feared communism more than fascism
- 3) Many people, especially in Britain, thought The Treaty of Versailles was extreme in its treatment of Germany and now they were willing to "look the other way" to make things right.
- 4) The world was in a depression and many people were concerned with feeding their own family and not what was happening within Germany.

Now after some further research I feel I might have a fifth reason. "The world did not really care what happened to the Jews in Europe." Either because of apathy or hatred when people heard the 1930's horror stories it was not something that stirred them if Jewish people were the oppressed group. That looks like one change I will make.

Book Review

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Page 8: What Have You Learned? And How Will You Incorporate
What You Have Learned Into Your Teaching Unit?

I. Why this book?

"Counselor" is probably not a book I would read on my own. I have always thought that the administration of John F. Kennedy was too brief to judge or at least too short to compare to other presidencies and in my experience reading Ted Sorensen he tries to do both.

Having lived through (although at a young age) Kennedy's presidency I do remember the excitement of the election of a new, vibrant young president. Looking back I realize some of this excitement came from Kennedy being from Massachusetts (like me) and Irish Catholic (like me) but I remember other national and international signs back in the day that showed this president was different than the stodgy old guys who came before him. There was his young family with an attractive wife. His exciting inaugural address. His foreign trips to Ireland and Berlin. I remember the enthusiasm of the crowds wherever he went. The feeling this was something different than came before. Even a comedy album that was successful called "The First Family" never would have happened during the Eisenhower administration. If such a parody had occurred in the 1950's, Eisenhower never would have acknowledged it like JFK did ("I thought it sounded more like [Teddy](#) than it did me".) What I truly remember about the JKK presidency was that it seemed to be something different and our world may now be different.

But was it different? Beyond the superficial of a Boston accent and a comedy album was the Kennedy presidency different and did it have substantial impact? As I said above I have always thought it was too brief to judge. That is why I have always cringed when I read Op Ed pieces by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. or Ted Sorensen which speak of the glory and impact of those years. Even

more I resent how Schlesinger and Sorenson write about how things would have been if John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated. Their world is always one where there never would have been civil rights riots in the 1960's. The war in Vietnam would have ended with the "advisors" Kennedy sent to Southeast Asia. The economy never would have suffered and our neighbors all would have loved us. All in all the United States would have been a better place, a much better place. One might say a "perfect" place in the eyes of Kennedy's historians if JFK never was assassinated. In my eyes I believe you could make the case that if Kennedy had lived events would have been more or less the same, maybe worse but in truth none of us know. The president's body of work is just too short for anyone to say definitively how things may have been different.

That is why I was wary about the TAH trip to The Kennedy Library. I expected more revisionist Kennedy history such as Sorensen's. How surprised I was that day to hear Sheldon Stern take Sorensen to task for his recollection and writings about The Cuban Missile Crisis. I especially loved the story of how Stern and Sorensen met at a conference. Sorensen speaking to their disagreement on the discussions during the missile crisis pointed out that he was there. This remark came back to me when I read in "Counselor" one of the obstacles that Sorensen had in writing the book, "I increasingly recognized several major obstacles: 1) the hazards of memory, inevitably influenced by selectivity and hindsight." To paraphrase Stern's response to Sorensen at the conference "You might have been there but I have the tapes on what was said".

II. and III. The Author and The Author's Thesis

The author of "Counselor" is Ted Sorensen. Born in Lincoln, Nebraska and graduate of University of Nebraska Law School Sorensen went to work for Senator John F. Kennedy in 1953 and continued to work for him as an advisor and speechwriter until his assassination as President in 1963. After 1963 Sorensen went on to become an international author and writer.

The thesis for writing "Counselor" is contained in the first 3 paragraphs of the Preface:

- 1) The first book that Sorensen wrote on Kennedy was too close in time (1965) to the assassination and "the passage of time has made a broader, more candid perspective possible."
- 2) The 1962 magazine headlined "Ted Sorensen: Administration Mystery Man" had never really been addressed. "Counselor" is an attempt to explain the background, values and ideas of Sorensen.
- 3) Today is a world of "cynicism and mistrust about presidential politics" and "it is possible to have a president who is honest, idealistic, and devoted to the best ideals of this country. It happened at least once – I was there". Sorensen's goal was to show "the sorry spectacle of today's leadership {is} deplorably different from that of JFK."

IV. Does The Author Prove His Point

Yes and No (and I hate those types of answers, my students would be yelling "you always tell us to make a decision").

Yes, because I loved the stories of Sorensen's early life. The sort of stories that people were probably looking for in 1962 when they asked "who is this close advisor to the president who seems to have so much power?" Sorensen does a great job in reflecting on his upbringing by a Jewish mother who gives up writing to raise 5 children and a Unitarian father who was both a lawyer and a politician. One can see by the way Sorensen tells the story of the blending of family, religion (mostly Unitarian), education and tragedy. The tragedy being his mother's mental illness that struck her when he was fifteen. It is amazing that someone who has written and spoken as much as Sorensen could write in "Counselor", "This is the first time I have written or spoken about this part of my life". One gets the feeling that the writing of this book may have been a late in life catharsis for Sorensen. For the reader it takes someone who was one of a president's highest advisors during one of the most critical times in our history – and it makes him human. When Sorensen writes "it is difficult because I find myself, even though I now know better, unavoidably feeling the sense of shame and stigma that mental illness brought to our family back then" what reader cannot either empathize or sympathize.

Is "Counselor", "a broader, more candid perspective" than Sorensen wrote earlier? Without a doubt. But is it "a broader, more candid perspective **possible**". I don't think so. Sorensen devotes 7 1/2 pages to "My Perspective on JFK's Personal Life". It is a subject that had to be addressed by someone who was as close to Kennedy as Sorensen. It could not have been avoided. At least Sorensen does use the excuse of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "Questions which no one has the right to ask are not entitled to truthful answers". But it does seem that Sorensen does "pull his punches" a little

when it comes to Kennedy's known affairs. Sorensen will tell a story about "the Bachelor Senator", how Judith Exner's claims were "steadily refreshed as her agent solicited more money", a letter to Marilyn Monroe was a forgery and "hijinks in the White House swimming pool, long alleged, were perhaps inappropriate but not illegal". Sorensen does come down on JFK's "mistakes" with "It was self indulgent. It does not reflect well on his attitude toward public office, the sacred trust. It was wrong, and he knew it was wrong, which is why he went to great lengths to keep it hidden." I believe Sorensen keeps it mostly hidden too by not addressing more fully the character issue, the personal impact on his family and the potential for being a national security risk.

I also say "No" to "counselor" being a "a broader, more candid perspective" because of Sorensen's recollections of The Kennedy/Joseph McCarthy relationship. Early in the book Sorensen talks about his arrival in Washington "In those years, Washington was not wholly attractive to an idealistic twenty-three year old newcomer from the Midwest. Senator Joseph McCarthy was tarnishing the city, country, and Senate with his wild accusations. His association with the Republican Party was a major reason for my growing preference for the Democratic Party".

But when it came time to censure Joseph McCarthy in the United States Senate, Senator John F. Kennedy was the only senator to be unrecorded. Sorensen makes excuses such as Kennedy being in the hospital and could not be reached ("My guess is that if he had truly wanted to reach me from the hospital he could have") and there was a moderate censure speech written and ready for release but never saw the light of day. This is the sort of material that makes Sorensen's pronouncements on today's "cynicism and mistrust about presidential politics" and "it is possible to have a president who is honest, idealistic, and devoted to the best ideals of this country." sound like a man who really does not want to see the entire truth. This is why people have cynicism and mistrust about biographers who were on the inside with their subjects.

V and VI. What Have You Learned? And How Will You Incorporate What You Have Learned Into Your Teaching Unit?

I learned a lot about Ted Sorensen and his upbringing. Especially the impact of his Unitarian background and how that meshed with JFK's Catholic upbringing. It is also evident how his religion impacted many of his political beliefs and ironic how the two religious men had serious issues when it came to marriage.

Also it was interesting to get Sorensen's view on the group David Halberstam called "The Best and the Brightest". The group could be any workplace with their divisions (Powers/Sorensen), gossip and backstabbing (Dick Goodwin). Whether it is a business, a school system, a non-profit or even The Peace Corps (a friend of mine worked there and said it was the worst example she ever experienced) it is amazing how whenever human beings get together these things always happen. Even in The White House. I think I will pass this lesson on to my students.

One other interesting "insider" moment was the chapter "The Death of President Kennedy". Mary McGrory's description of Sorensen that day "looking white faced and stricken, unseeing and unhearing in the nightmarish light and noise" reflects Sorensen's recollection of that day. As much as I am critical of his selective remembrance of JFK I think he does a wonderful job writing about the day of Kennedy's death, the funeral and the following days. He truly shows his love and loyalty to his friend. I think that story is worth passing along to students.

I think a chapter that would be worthwhile to students would be "Speechwriting". Anyone with Sorensen's experience and background is worth listening to when it comes to writing. His six basic rules are as good as any writing program or criteria that I have seen in high school. I especially liked his rule "Less is almost always better than more". So I will end this review here.