Don't Trust Movies Named 'Munich'

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THE CITY NAME "Munich" is already profoundly associated with cinematic moral confusion. It was the title Steven Spielberg gave his relativistic reflection on the way the Mossad avenged the murder of Israeli athletes in 1972. Now Netflix has given us *Munich: The Edge of War,* a prestige film that has gained a high-end audience and that has been hailed by many critics. At its heart is a quest to undo the legacy of one of history's greatest heroes and to lionize one of its weakest statesmen.

The movie seeks nothing less than to celebrate Neville Chamberlain, a man whose name is eternally affiliated with appeasement. It focuses on the meeting between the British prime minister and Hitler when the latter asserted Germany's right to the Czech territory Germans called the Sudentenland. Chamberlain conceded and returned home brandishing a signed promise by Hitler not to wage war on Britain.

Told primarily through the eyes of two young aides to these leaders, *Munich: The Edge of War* pushes back on the notion that Chamberlain was duped by the Führer. The film instead portrays a canny prime minister who seeks to buy time before a war that seems likely to come. In the movie, following the conference at Munich, the English aide glumly goes home and tells his wife that Chamberlain's deal with Hitler was "just a delay." He goes on: "The PM's given us a chance of winning the damn thing when it happens. It's quite some service when you think about it." The film further concludes by informing the audience that Chamberlain's agreement allowed time for Britain to arm, as if preparation for war had been the prime minster's intention all along.

The source of this naked historical revisionism is Robert Harris, the author of the bestselling 2017 novel on which the movie is based. As Harris has made clear in interviews, he believes the heroic image of Churchill as the only leader in Britain who understood Hitler's purposes and intentions is mistaken. "We have a very strong image of this island standing alone, weak, defenseless—pulled back together by an effort of will," Harris has said. "Well, none of it's really true." For Harris, Chamberlain is the overlooked giant of the battle against Nazism. His novel is "a real re-evaluation of this historical figure, a great man."

This anti-Churchill thesis has been embraced by Jeremy Irons, the Oscar-winning British actor who plays Chamberlain. He told *Variety:* "Churchill was able to write the history of that period afterwards. It's all very easy to look back at history and see what you want to see. But at the time, I believe Chamberlain followed the right path. He tried to prevent war. He tried to appease Hitler and got an agreement with Hitler

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that he would go no further. That was a canny thing to do because once Hitler did go further, he was able to say to the country, this man is not to be trusted and we're going to have to fight him. I think Chamberlain should be praised for his pragmatic behavior. We shouldn't view the Munich Agreement simply as the appeasement of a weak man who was fooled by Hitler. It's the wrong way to look at it."

The only problem with this assertion is that it is preposterously false, and we know this because of what the film deliberately omits. Its director is Christian Schwochow, who worked on *The Crown*, and he brings to life the look and feel of the summit and Britain in the 1930s as well. But what the movie does not show us is the one historical scene that proves conclusively that its thesis is false. That moment came when Chamberlain stood on the balcony of Buckingham Palace clutching his agreement in hand and compared himself to Benjamin Disraeli, who had returned from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 where he truly had achieved a peaceable solution to a raging territorial conflict in Europe: "My good friends, this is the second time in our history that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time."

If Chamberlain had not truly believed at the moment that he had made peace with Hitler—as the aide's remark at the end of the movie suggests—would he have ever said such a thing? If Chamberlain had only been cannily buying time to arm Britain against Hitler, would he have defined his own legacy with such a comparison? And if the film truly believes what it asserts about Chamberlain, why would it cut the most famous moment in the Munich story? Can there be any reason other than its inconvenience, the fact that it directly and explicitly contradicts its entire thesis?

Chamberlain clearly did believe that he had made peace with Hitler, as did the English elite who cheered him in Parliament when he returned. And we must therefore understand why Churchill saw what so many others missed. The most interesting character in *Munich* is an aide to Hitler who as a student was enthusiastic about the "new Germany" and then becomes revolted by it. The role is based on Adam von Trott, who later attempted to assassinate Hitler. In the movie, it is the Nazis' treatment of the Jews that wakes this young man to the danger posed by Hitler. This ironically highlights what is elided in the film. As Andrew Roberts has noted, the Anglo elite refused to fully face up to the horrors of Hitlerism because many of them cared so little for the fate of the Jews of Germany.

There is a reason, Roberts notes, that Churchill saw what his countrymen did not: "Churchill's philo-Semitism, so rare on the Tory benches, was invaluable in allowing him to see sooner than anyone else the true nature of the Nazi regime." This, Roberts writes, further highlights what set Churchill apart: "Despite being the son of a chancellor of the Exchequer and the grandson of a duke, he was a contrarian and an outsider. He even refused to subscribe to the clubland anti-Semitism that was a social glue for much of the Respectable Tendency, but instead was an active Zionist. The reason his contemporaries saw him as profoundly perverse is because he truly was."

Jews therefore have a special stake in seeing that the depiction of Munich and its aftermath are true and correct. This does not mean that a statesman must always prefer war to the alternative; Churchill himself famously opined that "it is better to jaw-jaw than to war-war." But one central lesson of Munich—the conference, not the movie—is that it is essential to recognize when evil exists, and it is precisely in this area that Chamberlain failed so profoundly. This year, we mark the 50th anniversary of another morally shameful moment in Munich: when, after the brutal murder of Israel's athletes by terrorists, the Olympics went on as normal with the international community evincing little concern. We are therefore especially obligated by history to focus on, and celebrate, the heroes in history who understood the motivations of evil men when so few did.

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Upon learning of Churchill's death, Leo Strauss delivered an impromptu tribute during his University of Chicago seminar. While watching a film in which Churchill does not appear, and that valorizes the appeasers, I thought again of Strauss's words: "We have no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to remind ourselves and our students, of political greatness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excellence. For we are supposed to train ourselves and others in seeing things as they are, and this means above all in seeing their greatness and their misery, their excellence and their vileness, their nobility and their triumphs, and therefore never to mistake mediocrity, however brilliant, for true greatness."

This is why *Munich: The Edge of War* must be recognized as a work of moral and artistic mendacity and mediocrity. ❧