

Revisionist History



Washington Crossing the Delaware II, Roy Lichtenstein, 1951

All history is revisionist. A previously settled view can always be challenged by archeological discovery or by dissenting historians. Even the 'Dark Ages' turned out to be not so dark after excavation of the Sutton Hoo burial ship, with its myriad of treasures a memorial to Raedwald, King of East Anglia. There is currently an attempt by TV historians to reassess Nero, on the grounds that he was not nearly so bad as Tacitus and Suetonius made him out to be. "The truth is far more nuanced" is their bid for a more elevated discourse, and the nuancy-boys of history will not allow Peter Ustinov's Nero, in the film *Quo Vadis*, to have the last word. They are backed by the British Museum, which has mounted an

exhibition *Nero: The Man Behind the Myth*. In 1961, A.J.P. Taylor created a sensation with his *The Origins of the Second World War*. He argued that Hitler was a German statesman in the tradition of Bismarck and Bethmann-Hollweg. A supreme opportunist, he fed on the blunders and false judgments of Britain and France, and owed much to the quality of his opponents. Taylor's thesis was highly controversial: Hugh Trevor-Roper, who debated the book on TV with Taylor, felt that Alan (they remained good personal friends) had had rather the better of the debate. The after-shock has yet to settle down, and the book remains "still hugely valuable" (Norman Stone, 2014). "The verdict of history," a phrase more popular on the Left than the Right, is a useless myth. "Whose verdict, and when was it lodged?" are the only questions worth asking.

One verdict still stands. Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler* is a stone-cold, unassailable masterwork. He was appointed by the Head of Counter-Intelligence in the British Zone of Germany to find out, if possible, what had happened to Hitler, who had been missing for four months. Trevor-Roper made his report to the Four Power Intelligence Committee on 1 November 1945, and this was the genesis of a book that swelled to its Seventh Edition. Only Trevor-Roper could have carried out the original research, and he was given prompt and generous support by the American authorities in Frankfurt. All their material was put at his disposal, and he was allowed to interrogate their prisoners, who included the staff and entourage attending Hitler in the Chancellery. Later editions added greatly to the material available in 1945, such as the then-mysterious refusal of the Russians to divulge what they knew. But *The Last Days of Hitler*, beautifully written and completely authoritative in its own terms, has never been out of print since. Trevor-Roper leaves an unforgettable picture of Hitler living out his fantasies on an "imaginary battlefield. He was mounting the impossible Steiner attack, or marshalling the phantom army of Wenck." The facts which Trevor-Roper unearthed have never been seriously challenged,

and they are the bed-rock of history.

Peter Hitchens' *The Phoney Victory: The World War II Illusion* comes from a different tradition. It is the most striking revisionist history of the era that I know. The author is a maverick, who describes himself as a Burkean Conservative and Anglican Christian. His personal journey is from the outer Left—some years spent reporting on the Eastern bloc cured him of that—to the Conservative Party, which he left in disgust. Boris Johnson, in his view, is simply not a Conservative. His best book, I'd say, is *The Abolition of Britain*. He is warily respected on the liberal Left, less so by the Conservatives. His latest is an all-out attack on the national myth of World War II.

That myth is best phrased by the Prince of Wales, who said in a BBC religious broadcast (22 December 2016) that WW2 was “a battle against intolerance, monstrous extremism, and an inhuman attempt to exterminate the Jewish population of Europe.” Other than retrospectively, that claim, as Hitchens says, is almost completely false. The war began and continued on entirely different bases of knowledge, calculation, and national support. Nations do not go to war because they disapprove of intolerance, other people's intolerance anyway. Britain's entry was made inevitable by the Polish guarantee of March 1939, a reaction to Munich which must rank among the most foolish and suicidal policies ever made. We could do nothing to protect or save Poland. The Polish guarantee was merely a bluff, which Hitler contemptuously called.

Munich itself was hardly the betrayal of myth, and lazy commentary: it was supported by the British military, especially Sir Hugh Dowding, who needed time above all to bring on his Spitfires. Munich bought Britain time. As A.J.P. Taylor asked, “Which was better—to be a betrayed Czech or a saved Pole?” And then calculations were demolished by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 23 August 1939. Without exception, all previous policies were overturned. Even the informed and

balanced Charles Moore in the latest *Telegraph* writes of the pact as a “revelation,” which seriously misstates the total shock inflicted on the world. Chamberlain, on whom “appeasement” hangs like a shroud, should appear in a rather better light.

Indeed, the new Netflix film, *Munich: The Edge of War*, based on the novel by Robert Harris, proposes a pro-Chamberlain narrative distinct from the history that Churchill laid down. “Chamberlain got a rather rough deal, because he died and the histories were all written by Winston Churchill and all the blame was heaped on Chamberlain.” This is perfectly true. Harris’s conclusion is “This will be the first time a major movie has gone beyond the cult of Winston Churchill and tried to show Chamberlain in a more sympathetic light.” And Netflix has secured an actor of Jeremy Irons’ distinction to play him. Chamberlain will get a fair hearing. The war, when it came a week after the pact, was indeed a necessary war, but one cannot erect a splendid moral mansion on its rickety foundations.

Hitchens is the latest in the line of revisionist historians who do not buy the myth of the war, either of British diplomacy or the conduct of the war itself. That line includes Corelli Barnett’s *The Desert Generals* and *The Audit of War* (of whose writings Field-Marshal Montgomery is reported to have said, “I see that *Sergeant* Barnett has written another book”), A.J.P. Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War*, John Charmley’s *Churchill: The End of Glory*, a thesis hijacked by Alan Clark, and Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War*. In it, Roberts dismisses in a sentence the oft-heard claim that Britain “won the war” (as distinct from being on the winning side of the war, indispensably so): “The central statistic of the war is that 80% of all German military casualties were inflicted on the Eastern front.” Stalin’s verdict on the Allied victory was “Britain provided time, America money, Russia blood.”

Britain declared war on Germany, as it did in August 1914, not the other way round. Hitchens questions whether September 1939 was the right moment for Britain to enter the war, and whether that decision should be Poland's. Britain and France were unprepared for war, and the hard case was for Hitler to declare war on Russia first. The Battle of Britain was a wonderful episode in the nation's history, but it was played up as a morale-boosting and decisive event. R.A. Butler said privately on August 14th 1940, "The invasion is hooey. Hitler is going east." As he did. The invasion was never on; the Kriegsmarine would never attempt it without a complete victory by the Luftwaffe, and the Army refused to move without the assurances of the Navy. Hitler himself saw the invasion as a useful threat rather than a likely triumph. The invasion threat melts under close scrutiny, leaving in its wake a glowing myth. It nurtures the larger myth of the Good War which, Hitchens argues, has been used subsequently to support unwise wars of choice. One is left with the deeply uncomfortable feeling that Lord Halifax, the anti-hero of the film *Darkest Hour*, had a strong case, supported by Chamberlain: Britain should have spun out negotiations with Hitler, which could be indefinitely time-consuming, leaving him to get on with his Barbarossa project. That way we would have stayed out of serious fighting for as long as possible, vastly to the advantage of the nation. We are left with the history that we've got, with its attendant myth. But that is not the same as believing in it.

I cannot imagine a reader of *The Phoney Victory* who would agree with all of it. But much of Hitchens' argument strikes home and leaves an indelible imprint on the mind. This book is well written, tenaciously argued, and damnably persuasive.