

The Munich Agreement and the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia: The real lessons of appeasement in the 1930s

By Julie Hyland
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There has been much talk during the last weeks of the failed policy of "appeasement" with Nazi Germany prior to World War Two. British Prime Minister Blair claimed his "generation of '68" had learnt the lessons of the 1930s--hence their willingness to take military action against Serbia. Earlier this week Clare Short, Labour's International Development Secretary, denounced MPs in her own party who oppose the NATO bombardment as "equivalent to the people who appeased Hitler".

Perhaps one of Alistair Campbell's first tasks in his new job assisting NATO's "public relations" should be to advise the government to drop such comparisons, lest they inadvertently find themselves on the wrong side of their own argument.

What was the content of "appeasement"? Historically this term refers to the Munich Agreement drawn up between Britain, France, Italy and Germany on September 29, 1938 which agreed the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany.

In his speech to the Reichstag on February 20, 1938, Adolf Hitler had declared himself the protector of "oppressed Germans" on the Third Reich's borders. Under the guise of "self-determination" for the German populations in the surrounding countries, Hitler began to implement his plan for *Lebensraum*-- "living room in the east". Three weeks later Austria was annexed by Germany.

Hitler's attention then focussed on Czechoslovakia, with its large German-speaking population in the Sudetenland region. Utilising the German Sudeten Party (SP), a pro-Nazi organisation, he set out to create a pretext for the take-over of Czechoslovakia. Under Hitler's instructions, the SP was told to present the

Czech government with demands for such a degree of Sudeten autonomy that they would find it impossible to agree.

The British government fully supported Hitler's demands, even though they meant that Czechoslovakia would cease to be physically viable and would almost certainly break up. Under intense British and French pressure, the Czech government conceded full autonomy to the Sudetenland, but the offer was rejected on September 4 by SP leader Henlein, who proceeded to break off all relations with the government.

On September 12, at the last Nuremberg Nazi rally, Hitler demanded that the Czechs accept German claims. Three days later, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made his way to Berghof, promising to "advocate the far-reaching German proposals". On September 19, Britain and France presented the Czech government with Hitler's ultimatum and made clear their support. Nine days later they convened a four-power summit in Munich--involving Chamberlain, French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, Hitler and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Representatives of the Czech government were barred from attending and were locked in their rooms to await the outcome.

The Munich Agreement gave Hitler everything he wanted, and more. Without any consultation with the Czech government, the conference agreed that Germany could annex 10,000 square miles of territory--gaining not only the whole of the Sudetenland, but all of the mixed regions with a German population of 50 percent or more. The "appeasement" deal meant that Czechoslovakia lost all its border fortifications, whilst its transport and communications system were completely disrupted. On

September 21, the Czech government reluctantly acceded to this ultimatum.

The Munich Agreement was the piece of paper "signed by Herr Hitler" waved by Chamberlain when he returned to Britain promising "peace in our time". On March 15, 1939, German troops marched into Prague, and turned Bohemia and Moravia into protectorates of the Reich. In September, Hitler invaded Poland and annexed Danzig. Finally on September 3, World War Two began.

What was the content of the Rambouillet Accord presented to the Milosevic government in February? The NATO powers have sought to justify war against Yugoslavia on the grounds that the Serbian regime's refusal to agree the Rambouillet terms were a violation of the Kosovar's right to "self-determination".

It was the Western powers represented in the Contact Group (the US, Britain, Germany, France and Italy), who drew up the terms for the Rambouillet Conference in Paris. The Yugoslav government's participation was based on the understanding that the conference would first settle the issue of Kosovo's status and only then decide how this should be implemented. But in the course of the negotiations between February 6 and 23, the five Western governments shifted the agenda.

Ample evidence now exists that the five had been working closely with the Kosovo Liberation Army over the preceding period, essentially backing them in their war against Serbia. The Yugoslav government had largely agreed to the draft statutes covering autonomy for Kosovo. But during the conference the five governments tied this in with Yugoslavia accepting the stationing of NATO troops on its territory--a KLA demand.

Under the Rambouillet Accord, not only would NATO troops be stationed in Kosovo but they were to have complete freedom of movement "throughout all Yugoslavia", i.e., Serbia and Montenegro as well as Kosovo. Article 8 of Appendix B, "Status of Multi-National Military Implementation force", provided NATO with free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia] including associated airspace and territorial waters". Article 6 guaranteed NATO immunity from Yugoslav "jurisdiction in respect of any civil, administrative, criminal, or disciplinary offenses which may be committed by them in the FRY."

The Western powers delivered the Yugoslav government with an ultimatum--either accept these measures or face war. The provisions meant the whole of Yugoslavia would be subjected to NATO occupation. In signing the agreement, the Yugoslav government would have effectively relinquished sovereignty over their own territory.

When Yugoslavia, unlike "tiny Czechoslovakia" in the 1930s, did not surrender, NATO on March 24 began its aerial bombardment of the country.

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