

The Meaning of Munich Fifty Years Later

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Preface

Do the Munich accords of 1938—the failed attempt of Western democracies to appease Adolf Hitler on the eve of World War II—hold a lesson for the future of NATO? According to a team of scholars and policy analysts who participated in a Public Workshop at the United States Institute of Peace on “The Meaning of Munich Fifty Years Later,” the answer is an unqualified yes. But what lesson to draw, in an era of changing Soviet foreign policy and world power balances, remains a matter of sharp controversy.

The Institute convened this workshop on December 12, 1988, to take advantage of the flurry of interest generated by the fiftieth anniversary of the Munich agreement (between Adolf Hitler and Neville Chamberlain on September 30, 1938) and to join in the public discussion of the impact of that event on current thinking about peace and war, and the future of NATO. In convening this fourth in its series of Public Workshops, the Institute brought together seven former public officials: David Hendrickson of Colorado College; Christopher Layne of Blecher and Collins, Los Angeles, and the Cato Institute; Keith Payne of the National Institute for Public Policy; Earl C. Ravenal of Georgetown University; Robin Ranger, Jennings Randolph Peace Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace; Robert Rudney of the National Institute for Public Policy; and Jed Snyder of the National Security Information Center. (See Appendix for more detailed biographical descriptions of the participants.)

The purpose of the workshop was not to focus on appeasement and related issues but, rather, to reflect on Munich's specific lessons for peace and security in Europe and beyond in our own time. Each panelist was asked to consider such questions as: To what extent was Munich a reflection of the breakdown of collective action among democracies in a time of peace? What does Munich tell us about the responses of democracies to international crises? How did the recollection of Munich contribute to the formulation of European and other security arrangements in the post-World War II period? What are the lessons of Munich for the 1990s and beyond with respect to Western security arrangements?

Although the dramatic events of 1989 in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have considerably altered the nature of Western security concerns, much in the Public Workshop discussion continues to warrant serious consideration. Readers will find it a useful review of the history of European security arrangements since World War II and helpful background to current debates.

The December 1988 discussion ranged widely—from an assessment of the success of the Western Alliance to speculation about new security possibilities, such as a U.S.-Soviet condominium and the possible role of a rejuvenated United Nations Security Council. To begin, the participants readily agreed that Hitler's triumph at Munich completely reversed many Western attitudes. In the United States, the so-called realist school of foreign policy—headed by George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Walter Lippmann—argued that American isolationism had aided the rise of Hitler. Reacting to isolationism's failure, America embraced its opposite—interventionism backed by strong military force. A major lesson derived by Western European democracies from the Munich fiasco was, as David Hendrickson put it, that "we all have to hang together, or else we will hang separately." The confluence of the two positions, and a lasting monument to Munich, was the creation of NATO under the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

The speakers, however, disagreed sharply about how this postwar system has survived the test of time. Hendrickson and Robin Ranger believed that, on the whole, NATO has served its members well. The former pointed out that the main lessons drawn

from Munich—the need for an alliance of Western countries, for U.S. involvement in European peacekeeping, and for military balance between democracies and their adversaries—remain valid, and therefore recent calls for dismantling NATO are premature. “Maintain the U.S.-led alliance system,” Ranger advised. “Adjust it empirically, but don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”

The critics’ answer to Hendrickson and Ranger was that the Western security system is functioning so badly that, in some ways, the world is no better off today than it was in the 1930s. According to Earl Ravenal, U.S. foreign policy has on at least one occasion sunk to the depths reached by Britain and France when they forced Czechoslovakia—then allied with France—to surrender to the Munich dictate “in order to absolve themselves from war.” In Ravenal’s controversial view, Henry Kissinger emulated Chamberlain and Daladier when he “coerced” Israel into giving up parts of military gains made in the October 1973 war.

More “disturbing parallels” between prewar and present attitudes were perceived by Jed Snyder. At the time of Munich, he told the workshop, fear of war dominated strategic planning in London and Paris. In recent years, “disarmament and accommodation” have been the watchwords of West European policy. As a result, Snyder argued, relations between the United States and its allies have been strained, and Mikhail Gorbachev has been able to pursue a shrewd Soviet policy “which eschews war as a choice, but also eliminates the option of peace maintained through strength.” A key lesson of Munich—that democracies must not exclude the use of force only because it appears to be costly—has been forgotten, Snyder charged.

Christopher Layne traced the rifts inside NATO to the postwar resurgence of Western Europe and Japan: “The Alliance is breaking up because the Europeans have become more capable of asserting their own interests, and because they perceive that their interests in many respects differ from ours.” Projecting the process into the future, Ravenal predicted that the existing international system—in both the West and the East—will “disintegrate into a diffuse state of unalignment” accompanied by the emergence

of “regional powers” that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union will be able to “fully influence.”

For Layne, the most reasonable U.S. reaction to this threat would be to scrap NATO and its American atomic guarantees—which, he argued, are illusory because, in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack on Europe, they bind the United States to “commit suicide” for the sake of its allies. In the new international system he proposed, Western Europe and Japan would become “real” power centers, and the United States would assume the less strenuous role once played by Britain—namely, to maintain the balance of power in a multipolar world. The reshuffling of the international chessboard, Layne maintained, would enable the United States to “reap the benefits” of its postwar aid for European recovery.

The Gorbachev era has obviously complicated efforts by the experts to find Munich’s lessons for the 1990s. Ravenal, who in part agreed with Layne, suggested that the post-NATO world might be dominated by a U.S.-Soviet “condominium.” Such a cooperative arrangement, he argued, was already foreshadowed in the early 1970s, when President Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev agreed to collaborate in suppressing nuclear proliferation. More recently, Ravenal said, “condominial attitudes” were “very strongly” in evidence at the Reykjavik summit, when President Reagan suggested that the United States might be willing to share information about the Strategic Defense Initiative with the Soviets.

In a related argument, another discussant noted that the danger perceived by many experts is of the two superpowers being drawn into clashes between intractable Third World “local actors,” whose armies are entering the age of chemical, missile, and even nuclear warfare. To defuse such potentially disastrous situations, the United States and the Soviet Union could decide to fall back on the United Nations Security Council, which was originally designed to enable the great powers to work cooperatively to safeguard peace.

The discussant pointed out that Gorbachev launched a campaign over a year ago to “rejuvenate the UN’s peacekeeping capacities through the Security Council,” and “some of the recent

speeches" by Soviet spokesmen at the UN "could well have been written by [their American counterparts] in the late 1940s." Superpower cooperation in the Security Council might, after a lapse of four decades, once again become possible—especially if the West minds the lessons of Munich and maintains its alliance "in the event there is another change of course" in Moscow.

This publication makes available to the general public the substance of the Munich Public Workshop. What follows are the essays that were submitted by the panelists to elaborate their oral statements at the workshop. Also included is a detailed bibliography, authored by David Wurmser of the Institute staff, which addresses on various levels the relationship between the events at Munich fifty years ago and the question of European security today.

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