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Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France*. Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2011. vii + 295 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$101.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781409406259.

Review by Andrew Webster, Murdoch University.

There is no shortage of books about appeasement—quite the contrary—so any new work needs to have something fresh to say about this much-studied question and period. What does this study add? The subject of Daniel Hucker’s book is the role of public opinion in British and French decision-making during the climax of “appeasement,” the months stretching from the Sudeten crisis through to the outbreak of war in September 1939. It is notoriously hard, perhaps impossible, to pin down for any era the exact nature of what the different parts of a society collectively believed or desired. Hence we lack such analyses for many times of crisis and change. Here the author quotes approvingly the observation of Zara Steiner that “there is no study in depth of the sea-change in British opinion between September 1938 and August 1939, though every historical work on the subject refers to the phenomenon” (p. 8). But it must be said that Hucker’s book does not tackle this issue directly either. Rather, the question it answers might be formulated as: “what do the documents indicate that policy-makers in London and Paris *believed* the public thought during these months?” This seems an equally appropriate and valuable question, as it was those perceptions and representations that may have affected the behaviour and choices of policy-makers. And in its answers, this useful book does have interesting things to say. Much of its value comes from the fact that Hucker gives such close consideration to how the British and French assessed the state of public opinion on the *other* side of the Channel, and to how that may have influenced their respective policies at home.

The scope and depth of Hucker’s research ensures he avoids the easy trap of merely recreating those conclusions on public opinion that contemporary figures cared to record. His study is based upon a meticulous survey of available sources in both Britain and France, stretching across government archives, parliamentary debates, printed documents, private papers and memoirs, as well as some forty newspapers. The cumulative impact of this is genuinely impressive. Hucker writes in clear and concise fashion, without undue digression or distraction. If the book’s origins as a doctoral thesis are perhaps still too marked in its style and methodology, it possesses the virtues as much as the vices of that literary form: a highly focused, extremely detailed study of a concentrated period of time, including a helpful literature review, and with key points carefully introduced at the start and then neatly summarised at the end of each chapter.

The overall interpretation of the international politics of these months is familiar, but the approach taken does help broaden the dimensions in which it should be understood. For a start, as noted above, it rightly keeps at the forefront the interwoven nature of Anglo-French diplomacy during this period. Here its strength comes from the massive weight of evidence employed, in the broad trends that can be discerned as governments in both capitals considered the temper of their neighbour’s people. It also thickens our understanding of the shifts occurring inside Britain with a forensic and persuasive demonstration of the widening gap after Munich between Chamberlain and the British public, as he strove to maintain his policy of appeasement amidst the latter’s ever-increasing disenchantment. Here it

reinforces the awareness that unhappiness with appeasement began to surface almost immediately and thus long preceded the Prague coup of March 1939. For France, the analysis usefully differentiates between communist and non-communist opponents of appeasement, especially the extent to which that distinction was understood at the time. As to “the end of appeasement,” Hucker’s study shows that for some it never truly came to an end. The determination of such policymakers in both London and Paris to avoid war meant they focused with a tunnel vision-like intensity up to the very last moment on those “residual representations” of anti-war sentiment and war anxiety that they could discern within the public arena (p. 11). By September 1939, they may have been grabbing desperately at straws, given the overwhelming shifts discernible in the “reactive representations” of opinion towards an acceptance of the necessity of resistance since Munich, but that is not to say that such views had not previously dominated or that they did not continue to exist. It is a useful way to characterise the political context as the advocates of appeasement understood it, and to explain what is otherwise too easy to dismiss as mere blindness, arrogance or even cowardice.

The book has trouble with the same methodological conundrums that all such studies of public opinion must face: how representative are the sources selected to embody public opinion; how closely to connect a newspaper’s editorial position with the views of its readers; how were the various papers and their readerships understood by the policymakers who were presumably monitoring them; how to tease apart the relationships existing within the many and diverse members of the “policymaking elite” (that handy and all-purpose shorthand label); and, most importantly, how to identify with any certainty the specific influences at work on any shift of a government’s or individual’s position. When Halifax telegraphed to Chamberlain in Godesberg on 23 September 1938 that the “great mass of public opinion seems to be hardening in sense of feeling that we have gone to the limit of concession,” for example, Hucker is still constrained to conclude only that Halifax “may well have been influenced” by the editorials in some of that day’s papers (p. 48). But the existence of these difficulties is an immutable feature of this topic, and so encountering them is also a mark of the author’s ambition to tackle such a tricky subject head-on.

The investigation of appeasement is not likely to be exhausted any time soon, so there can be little doubt that still more studies will follow, whether having something to say or not. For its own part, though, this is a sturdy and welcome contribution which has its place as an addition to the literature on this evergreen question.

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