

THE UNUSUAL “HISTORY OF A HISTORY”

Collaborative efforts among historians often have fascinating histories. A recent collaboration of mine strikes me as quite unique, though it may have some lessons for all of us not to make the writing of history a closed shop for members of the professoriate. My collaborator, who was indeed the brains behind the project, left school at age 12 (though he later returned at age 35 to get a PhD in Physics), has no training as a historian, writes poorly in English (it's his fifth language), and was supposed to be dead from a spreading cancer long before the book appeared. Yet he is brilliant, and *The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion*, the result of our collaboration, is a provocative work of history.

The story begins when Clement Leibovitz, former Egyptian Jewish Communist school dropout, former Israeli physics student, and eventually computer analyst at the University of Alberta, received a death sentence in 1981. His cancer of the prostate had spread to other organs, and the doctors gave him six months to live. Clement decided to spend these six months writing a polemical feminist work that he entitled *Memoirs of God*. A year passed, and Clement, deciding that he was living on borrowed time, decided to research what had really gone on in Britain and France while Hitler armed. He was suspicious that the notion of “appeasement” was a cover-up for more sinister relations between the British and the Nazis throughout much of the decade, and wanted to check all the primary and secondary materials available to test his thesis.

I had met Clement in 1982 when we were both involved in an Edmonton group called Jews for Peace in the Middle East, which denounced the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and called for immediate Israeli talks with the PLO, a position that was anathema to the Canadian Jewish community at the time. Clement asked me to collaborate on his “Chamberlain project,” but I had little desire to work with someone who was supposed to be already dead. So I protested that I was a Canadian historian, and could not be of much help.

A decade later, Clement, still very alive, arrived with a manuscript that he was publishing as a vanity effort, and a houseful of documents. The manuscript was at once brilliant and terrible, a mixture of polemic and insights without apparent organization. What was particularly fascinating was his ability to demonstrate that the language of diplomats of this period was a veritable language all its own, that required translation into plain English. Here was the “linguistic turn” brought onto the terrain of politics, and made far more convincing than it often turns out to be in social histories. Some of the documents Clement had dug up had been conveniently ignored by the traditional diplomatic historians of the 1930s, or had been trivialized. I came to share his view that the relations between British governments and Hitler in the 1930s was best characterized as “collusion” rather than appease-

ment: first Baldwin and then Chamberlain, along with their key ministers, welcomed Hitler's takeover of Germany, regarding him as the anti-Communist Messiah, and offering him a free hand in central and eastern Europe if he kept his paws off western Europe and the British Empire (when it appeared that he would not do the latter, they reluctantly abandoned him).

On one of his forays to France, Clement had met an amateur historian like himself, who was obsessed with the collusion between French leaders and the Nazis, even after war had been declared. This fellow sent us a shipload of documents that also aided in the writing of *The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion*.

I sent Clement's manuscript to several publishers, but even those who liked it felt it required a total rewrite and that they could not afford to have someone serve as a ghost writer. Finally, I agreed to take on the ghost writer role. I also insisted on checking through all of Clement's documentation, and, since Clement's French collaborator had provided no manuscript, wrote a chapter based on his materials from scratch. Apart from ghost writing, I also wrote a chapter analysing why earlier historians had either presented Chamberlain as a naive appeaser, or worse had suggested British Foreign policy in the 1930s was both defensible and moral, and had not represented any caving in to Hitler.

The book was eventually published by Merlin in Britain, James Lorimer in Canada, and Monthly Review in the U.S. with the latter convincing the prolific left-wing journalist, Christopher Hitchens, to write an introduction. Its reception has been mixed. Perhaps because neither author is a “name” in European history, it has not received academic reviews outside of one Internet review by an author who generally could not follow its argument. By contrast, it has received excellent reviews in the London *Independent*, in *Choice* magazine, and in the six Canadian newspapers and magazines (three in Atlantic Canada, three on the Prairies) that have chosen to send it out for review. Hitchens flogged it in an article in *Vanity Fair*. I think it is an important book, demonstrating that the Cold War began indeed in 1917 and that aristocratic anti-Communists allowed Hitler and the Holocaust to happen. It may be the book that I was least qualified to write, but it is the book of which I am proudest.

Clement Leibovitz, by the way, is alive and well in Edmonton, his cancer apparently “cured by curiosity”, as an *Edmonton Journal* columnist suggested. He is working on a novel, on a history of socialism, and on a history of Egypt in the dying days of British colonialism and the early years of Nasser.

Alvin Finkel, Athabasca University