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Political Science

On Compromise and Rotten Compromises
Avishai Margalit
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"How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing," said the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in a radio broadcast in September 1938, referring to the Sudeten crisis. Two days later, he signed the Munich Agreement with Hitler, transferring Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Germany.

Avishai Margalit calls the agreement a rotten compromise, not because of what Chamberlain gave away, not even because Czechoslovak diplomats were kept away from the room where the deal was made, but because Hitler signed it. The author, professor at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, believes in compromise, especially "for the sake of peace." And he values peace even more than justice. But he draws the line at offering concessions to those who subject others to cruelty and humiliation.

Margalit bases *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* on two lectures he gave at Stanford University in 2005. His style is informal and the book is an invitation to join him as he tells stories, personal and historical, and mines them for insight and illumination. His use of economic analogies brings lofty concepts to earth. Peace and justice to him are not complementary, like "fish and chips," but competing goods, like "tea and coffee." There's a trade-off between the two; to gain the first, politicians may have to concede ground on the second, and even then peace is not guaranteed.

Jan Masaryk, the Czechoslovak ambassador to Britain, lamented his country's dismemberment by the Munich Agreement. "If it is for peace that my country has been butchered up in this unprecedented manner I am glad of it. If it isn't, may God have mercy on our souls," he said. But Chamberlain's rotten compromise did not buy peace for Europe. Hitler occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and set off the Second World War when he invaded Poland six months later.

Margalit turns to the war for many of his examples, explaining that such ordeals reveal moral preferences held by warring sides much as a supercollider throws up elementary particles for study by physicists. But he is equally masterful when he examines other subjects: slavery, negotiations with terrorists, and the IsraeliÂ–Palestinian conflict. Readers will find excellent advice in the book as they scrutinize the morality of the compromises their leaders make on their behalf.