

## ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

### I. WORLD WAR II IN CONTEXT

World War II was the greatest war in world history. Some 35-60 million people died in this enormous global conflagration.

This vast war closely followed the most elaborate and hopeful effort ever made to design a peaceful world--the 1919 Versailles peace. Never before had world leaders sought so consciously to use their power to shape a peaceful world as they did in 1919. And never has the world seen such violence as it did in Versailles' aftermath. In contrast, the peace that emerged in 1945 was undesigned yet proved far more durable. What does this say of our capacity to engineer a more peaceful world?<sup>1</sup>

### II. WAR & REMEMBRANCE: HOW ILLUSIONS REPLACED REALITY IN EUROPE'S MEMORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR (See Holger Herwig, "Clio Deceived...")

Sometimes losers write history. They did here, and sold this history to the winners.

The world paid dearly for the German-authored Great Social Science Experiment of 1898-1918. (The experiment destroyed the laboratory!) But then someone falsified the lab notes.

### III. NATIONAL POLICIES AND IDEAS

#### A. Germany:

1. Germans practiced creative history. Weimar-era (1920's) German schools & scholars told and believed lies about:
  - a. The origins of WWI--"The Entente powers encircled Germany and instigated the war!"
  - b. The causes and responsibility for Germany's defeat--"the Jews and the socialists did it!", not Ludendorff and the superhawks. Germany's blunders were not evaluated. Those few scholars who did evaluate were persecuted.
  - c. The harshness of the peace--"Versailles was Draconian!"  
Moral drawn by Germany: "We need a bigger empire to be safe from our rapacious neighbors!" Instead of learning that a reach for lebensraum was dangerous, indeed suicidal, Germans learned that gaining lebensraum was essential!
2. Germans first embraced Nazi-like ideas (1920s), then the Nazis themselves (1930s). (Was World War II really just a 1-man show--"Hitler did it!""?? He had many willing helping hands!)
  - a. German neoconservative publishers, 1890-1930.
  - b. German war-cult literature, 1920s.  
Who purveyed these Nazi-like ideas? For what reason? We don't have a satisfactory answer; responsibility for this crime remains hidden in the mists of history.
3. Nazi beliefs about international affairs.
  - a. "Germany is insecure," especially "Germany can be strangled by cutting off food imports."
  - b. "An empire is the answer. Germany needs more territory because it needs an independent economy. It especially needs new food-producing lands."
  - c. "Offense is easy."
    - i. Bandwagoning--Hitler's "avalanche" theory.
    - ii. Contempt for the Soviet Union--"Germans built the USSR, but mere Jews run it now" so "We have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down."

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<sup>1</sup> A professional political scientist (Woodrow Wilson) was the chief architect of Versailles. Hmmm.

- iii. The invention of Blitzkrieg and Manstein's war plan (this occurred late-- during 1939-1940--but Hitler seemed to foresee them or their equivalent).
- 4. The German military buildup. During the late 1930s Germany spent a far larger share of its GNP on the military than did Britain and France (see attached Tables 30-32 from Paul Kennedy). This gave Germany a large but temporary military advantage during 1938-1940.

B. Japan:

- 1. Militarism appears in Japan. The military comes to dominate Japanese national ideas about foreign affairs, 1900-1941.
- 2. Ideas the Japanese military believed and/or purveyed:
  - a. "Japan is insecure, and an empire is the answer."
    - i. "Others are hostile." Japan embraced the myth of "ABCD [American, British, Chinese, Dutch] encirclement." It spiralled with neighbors, unaware that it provoked the hostility it faced.
    - ii. "These hostile powers could strangle Japan." Specifically, "World War I shows that states can strangle each other by blockading their maritime trade--as the Entente strangled Germany. We could be next."
    - iii. "Japan can and must address this threat by seizing an empire." Japanese believed that:
      - a. Due to factors i and ii Japan needed an independent economy that could function without external trade.
      - b. A wide empire could provide economic independence.
    - iv. "Japan can conquer an empire." Seizing an empire is a feasible proposition.
      - a. Bandwagon dynamics allow it: "With the Axis Alliance we can scare the US into accepting our expansion."
      - b. The U.S. won't resist: "If we hit America hard it will not fight all-out."
  - b. A sugar-coated self-image--"our empire is good for our fellow-Asians" and "we Japanese are not aggressive." After 1937 the Japanese press was forbidden to print "articles that may give the impression that our foreign policy is aggressive."
  - c. Note the disintegrated character of Japanese ideas:
    - i. "The US is so aggressive that they will destroy us unless we act; and so nice they will let us conquer Asia, and will not respond fully if we attack them."
    - ii. "Control of economic/industrial resources is so decisive in war that we must gain such control"--in a war against a state with 10 times Japan's net economic resources!
    - iii. "In World War I blockades strangled states, hence we need an economically independent empire"--even a seaborne empire. But WWI also showed that a seaborne empire could be strangled by an enemy with a superior navy (like the USA).
    - iv. "Our economy requires empire to expand"--even though Japan's economy grew by leaps and bounds during 1871-1929 without one.
- 3. Did Japan have alternatives? What if Japan had accepted its island borders and sought security through alliances, trusting the operation of the balance-of-power/balance-of-threat to produce help from others if it were ever threatened?

C. Italy--the land of blue smoke & mirrors. Mussolini's government:

- 1. Badly misperceived the realities of the late 1930s:
  - a. It believed gross overestimates of Italian military strength.
  - b. It believed gross overestimates of the value of empire.
- 2. Believed false images of the past: "We, the Italians, won WWI for the Entente! Then we were cheated of our fair share of the spoils!"

D. Britain:

- 1. Was generally isolationist.
- 2. Was further weakened by WWI.
- 3. Was late to rearm in the 1930s.
- 4. Embraced an aerial cult of the offensive--"the bomber will always get through."
- 5. Adopted a strategy of appeasement toward Germany. Why? Three explanations are common:
  - a. Craven cowardice. The British public and government were snivelling wimps who cowered before German belligerence. But if this is true, why did Britain declare war on Germany in 1939 and bravely fight on alone against Germany in 1940?

- b. Dilemmas of multiple contingencies. Some argue that Britain felt overextended and had to appease one of its adversaries--Japan, Italy, or Germany. Germany got the nod, purely for reasons of resource limitation.
- c. British belief that Germany was appeasable, due to false historical understanding. Too many Britons read and believed German propaganda, concluding that "We encircled and provoked the Germans; let's not do it again!" and "We were too mean at Versailles--German demands to revise it are legitimate."
  - a. After WWII a deterrence model myth arose around Munich, but...
  - b. After WWI a spiral model myth arose around the July crisis of 1914. And meanwhile, too few Britons read Ewald Banse and Mein Kampf.

(But also ask: what if Britain had gone to war without attempting appeasement, over issues of cloudy legitimacy? What if, therefore, the war had broken out in a way that failed to clearly illuminate German responsibility? How could a stable peace have then been made?)

E. The United States:

- 1. Embraced isolationism. Most important, Congress passed a series of neutrality laws during 1935-1939 that tied the president to a policy of strict neutrality in event of war elsewhere--an open message to the Nazis and Japanese saying "we won't oppose your aggression!"
- 2. Adopted a mobilization military strategy that included no large standing forces.
- 3. Had no clear national grand strategy; hence the United States could not predict its own behavior; hence others (Germany, Japan) couldn't predict it either.

F. France: absorbed in domestic left-right conflicts and unready for war.

G. The Soviet Union: is indifferent to--even helpful toward--the rise of Nazis in Germany in the early 1930s. Later it is confident that a war among western states would be a long stalemate, so it dismissed the danger that France would lose quickly leaving the Soviets to fight a larger, stronger Germany alone.

H. Everywhere except Germany: a military "cult of the defensive" gained currency. National elites assumed that offense would be as difficult in the next war as it was during 1914-1918.

IV. HOW THE STORM GATHERED: EVENTS IN EUROPE

A. Withdrawal of the USA, Britain, and USSR from central European affairs.

B. German rearmament--giving Germany an offensive capability and a fleeting superiority. (Why didn't the allies prevent German rearmament?)

C. Hitler wins without a war: appeasement and peaceful German expansion.

1. Hitler's recoveries & conquests:

- - German remilitarization of the Rhineland 1936
- - Austria 1938
- - Czech sudetenland 1938
- - The Czech rump, 1939
- - Memel, 1939

a. This is quite a nice empire! Why didn't it sate Germany? (Should Britain and France have launched a preventive war while it was being assembled?)

b. International effects of these German conquests:

- - Growth of German power.
- - Destruction of allied and German credibility.

2. The failure of a strong anti-German defensive alliance to emerge.

D. Hitler attacks Poland, Sept. 1 1939, launching World War II.

Questions about the outbreak of war:

1. Why did deterrence fail, Sept. 1, 1939? 6 explanations:

a. Appeasement destroyed British & French credibility.

b. Hitler's bandwagon beliefs destroyed British & French credibility: Hitler assumed that Britain and France would shrink from war if the USSR agreed to stay neutral, as it did on August 24, 1939 (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact).

c. Growth of German power, 1932-39.

- - When aggressors are stronger than status quo powers, we get war.

- - This is particularly true when the aggressor advantage is fleeting--this spurs preventive war by the aggressor.

d. British non-strategy.

e. Britain made the wrong threat to Germany? Some say Britain should have written off Poland, and only warned Germany not to invade the USSR--a threat that Britain had more capacity to carry out, and which therefore would have been more credible.

- f. Lack of allied (Franco-British) offensive capability against Germany?
- 2. Could Hitler's policy of peaceful expansion have worked in a Europe of nuclear-armed powers?
- E. Hitler declares war on the United States, December 1941. Why?

#### V. HOW THE STORM GATHERED: EVENTS IN ASIA

- A. The Japanese reach for empire, 1931, 1937 ff.: Japan's China advance ultimately requires the southern advance.
- B. The Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis alliance, Sept. 1940 (also called the Tripartite Pact).
- C. The progressive hardening of U.S. policy, 1931-1941.
  - - Why did the US goals expand? Specifically, why did the U.S. begin demanding Japanese withdrawal from China as the price of peace in July 1941?
    - Ideas that helped motivate the U.S. hard line position include:
      1. The China Market beckons. "Sell every Chinaman a shirt and we'll all get rich."
      2. The strategic importance of British colonies in Asia to the British war effort in Europe--a myth the British helped promote.
      3. The illusion of the Axis monolith: "Japan is Germany's loyal and obedient ally; hence Japan's gains accrue to Germany."
      4. "An Asian war can be a back door to a European war." (But might it not also be a trap door to an Asian morass that diverts the U.S. from Europe?)
    - Note: the China Lobby and the British government promoted some of these ideas.
  - - Why did the US embargo Japanese oil, July 1941? Utley v. Heinrichs interpretations.
- D. Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor. Was this smart? why not just bypass the Philippines, and then let Roosevelt try to start a war if it wanted one?
- E. Lessons of Pearl Harbor: Munich in reverse? Japan wasn't appeased--and it still went to war!

#### VI. WHAT CAUSED WWII?

- A. German Expansionism--but what caused that?
  - Dubious explanations:
    1. German national character? (But look at today's peaceful Germans...)
    2. Versailles--a "harsh peace"? (But it wasn't harsh--and 1945 was far harsher, but produced peace!)
    3. Hitler? (The "great man" theory?) (But wasn't German society primed to accept Hitler?)
    4. Militarism? (But the Weimar German military, while hardly benign, wasn't the main purveyor of Nazi ideas.)
  - Problematic explanations:
    1. The Great Depression, 1929-39--it brought the Nazis to power. (But the depression was worldwide. Why did it make only Germany crazy?)
    2. War ---> War: Was 1914-1945 one great, single war? Germans were steeped in the propaganda of WWI, and it's effects lived on later. (But why didn't WWI propaganda have the same effects in Britain, France, and the USA? And why didn't WWII later have the same effects as WWI?)
  - Other explanations:
    1. "Continuity" from before 1914: was Naziism an after-echo of the militarism & hyper-nationalism of 1890-1914? Was German national thought transformed by this earlier militarist/nationalist inculcation? (Hitler himself was steeped in the crazed pre-1914 writings of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Gobineau, and Haushofer. See Carr, Hitler).
    2. Nationalist mythmaking? We saw plenty after 1918. (A disease of a young democracy?)
    3. Non-evaluation: of the German policies of 1890-1918 during 1919-32; and of Hitler's ideas, 1932-1941. (Another disease of a young democracy?)
- B. Allied diplomacy. Could the allies have deterred Germany?
- C. Japanese Expansionism.
- D. Military factors: the security dilemma and its offspring.

#### VII. ESCALATION OF WWII

#### VIII. HITLER'S OTHER WARS: THE HOLOCAUST AND HITLER'S OTHER MASS MURDERS

CAUSES OF THE HOLOCAUST

I. THE COMMON EXPLANATION: VIRULENT GERMAN ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-semitic lunatics--Hitler and the Nazis--took over in Germany, murdered the Jews. The key mystery is: why did they get away with it? What allowed it?

Daniel Goldhagen variant (Hitler's Willing Executioners): an "eliminationist anti-semitism" was widespread among Germans and predisposed them to favor Hitler and help him with his Holocaust project.

Criticisms:

1. Anti-semitism was no more virulent in Germany than in Rumania, Poland, Russia, and Hungary during the 1930s. Why was there no holocaust by these other governments?
2. Hitler murdered millions of non-Jews as well as Jews--a fact that neither variant of the "virulent anti-semitism" theory predicts.
3. Had the German public been infused with the eliminationist anti-semitism that Goldhagen sees, German Jews would have seen the holocaust coming, in the eyes and words of their German non-Jewish neighbors. But clearly they didn't see it coming--this is why many did not flee, or fled only late in the game.
4. Spontaneous acts of anti-Jewish violence should have been common in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s--e.g., like the lynching of blacks in the American south during 1880s-1930s--but were not.
5. Hitler should not have hidden the holocaust from the German people if Goldhagen is correct. Instead he should have been proud to tell Germans about it. But in fact he hid it carefully. (Counterargument: Hitler may have concealed the holocaust from Germans to hide it from the wider world, whose reaction he feared.)
6. The "anti-semitic lunatics" explanation is unsatisfying. What or who made the Nazis into lunatics? What brought them to power? Likewise the "eliminationist anti-semitism" theory. If eliminationist anti-semitism was the cause, where did it come from?

II. THE SVE EXPLANATION:

Organized Christianity -----> Anti-semitism in Germany -----> holocaust

x

Anti-semitism throughout Europe--hence Ukrainians, Lithuanians, etc. helped Germans do the holocaust; and Americans, British didn't offer haven.

x

Highly effective German state

x

German militarism,  
international social -----> of mass expulsions and murder as an appropriate way  
Darwinism, general talk  
of empire and the need to  
seize it, especially by  
pan-Germans and the Army,  
during 1900-1918

This theory explains where Germany's lunatics came from, and predicts what we actually see: (1) mass murder of both Jews and non-Jews (although focused on the Jews); and (2) mass killing by Germany but not by other anti-semitic states. Hitler's murder victims, and Deaths from World War II in Europe

Compiled by John Mearsheimer

Total murdered: 17.9 million plus.

5.6 million Jews.

6 million non-Jewish Soviet civilians.

3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war (out of 5.7 million total Soviet POWs). From Mosaic of Victims, chapter by Christian Streit.

3 million Polish Christians. (But note: Sebastian Haffner, Meaning of Hitler, p. \*, says only somewhat more than a million were murdered. The rest died less directly.)

<1 million other (gypsies gays, Serbs, mentally ill, anti-Nazi political dissidents).

Total dead in WWII European Theater (compiled by John Mearsheimer):

40 million total fatalities

37 million in East

3 million in West

By country:

22 million USSR

8 million Germany

6 million Polish

1 million Rumania/Hungary (Jews)