

ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

I. WORLD WAR II IN CONTEXT

World War II was the greatest war in world history. It killed some 35-60 million people, 2-3 times the toll of World War I.

This grisly episode closely followed the most elaborate effort ever made to design a peaceful world--the 1919 Versailles peace. Never before had world leaders sought so consciously to shape a peaceful world as they did in 1919. And never before had the world such violence as in 1939-45. 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?¹

WWII included three distinct wars: Hitler's war on the states of Europe and elsewhere; Hitler's genocidal war on non-"Aryan" peoples; and the Pacific War--Japan's war of aggression in Asia. These wars had different causes.

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

Sometimes losers write history. Germany largely wrote the history of World War I and sold this false history to the winners.

The German-authored Great Social Science Experiment of 1898-1918 cost a bundle. (The experiment destroyed the laboratory!) Then someone falsified the lab notes.

III. NATIONAL POLICIES AND IDEAS

A. **Germany: lies galore:**

1. The German government secretly organized a public relations campaign (run from a secret office, the *kriegsschuldreferat*, or "war guilt office") to convince Germans and the world of German innocence and others guilt for World War I. As a result Weimar-era (1920's) German schools and scholars told and believed lies about:
 - a. The origins of WWI--"The Entente powers encircled Germany and instigated the war! We were innocent victims!"
 - b. The causes and responsibility for Germany's defeat--"the Jews and the socialists did it!" Those responsible--Ludendorff, Hindenburg, and other

¹ A professional political scientist, Woodrow Wilson, was the chief architect of Versailles. Not a high point for the field.

- superhawks--escaped blame. Germany's blunders were not evaluated. Those few scholars who did evaluate (e.g., Hermann Kantorowitz) were persecuted.
- c. The harshness of the peace--"Versailles was Draconian!" In fact the reparations that the allies demanded were not exorbitant, and could have been paid. Moral drawn by Germany: "We need a bigger empire to be safe from our rapacious neighbors!" Instead of learning that a reach for **lebensraum** ("living space") 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 one-man show--"Hitler did it!"? No--he had many helping hands.
 - a. German neoconservative publishers, 1890-1930. Their aim: maintain the old oligarchy, minimize democratization of Germany. See Gary D. Stark, Entrepreneurs of Ideology: Neoconservative Publishers in Germany, 1890-1933 (1980).
 - b. German war-cult literature, 1920s (e.g., Ernst Jünger).
 3. How Hitler rose: he came to power by exploiting the fear and anger that German WWI innocence propaganda stirred among Germans; and through the tactical blunders of the ideologically rigid German socialists.
 4. 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 autarkic economy. It especially needs to end German dependence on imported food by acquiring new farmland."
 - c. "Germany can conquer an empire." Why?
 - i. Bandwagon ideas. Hitler believed his "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."
 - iii. Stalin murdered many able Soviet military leaders in 1938. This opened a window for Germany.
 - iv. The invention of Blitzkrieg and the Manstein war plan. This occurred late--during 1939-1940--but Hitler seemed to foresee them or their equivalent.
 - v. Hitler thought the US would not oppose a German reach for empire, and in any case was "Judaized and Negrified."
 5. 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 30-31 from Paul Kennedy). This gave Germany a large but temporary military advantage during 1938-1940.
 6. German antisemitism. German society was bitten by

antisemitism although less severely than some East European states. Antisemitism was fostered by perennial Christian church teaching against the Jewish people. It also assumed a racial form in the late nineteenth century as social Darwinist ideas swept Europe. It assumed its most poisonous form in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which painted the Jewish people as a threat to the world. The Protocols were first read by Nazi leaders in the 1920s, and apparently were believed.

B. Japan:

1. Militarism appeared in Japan. The military came 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. "A Japanese empire is both necessary and sufficient to address this threat." 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.
 - c. The West is racist and won't ally with Japan so Japan can't secure itself by finding Western allies.
 - iv. "Japan can conquer an empire." Seizing an empire is feasible.
 - 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." Japan's government absurdly named its barbaric empire the "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere."
 - c. Note the disintegrated character of Japanese ideas.
 - i. "The US is so aggressive that it will destroy us

unless we act; and so nice it 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** was the land of blue smoke and mirrors. Mussolini's propaganda ministry had 890 employees--lots! His government:

- 1. Badly misperceived the realities of the late 1930s:
 - a. Mussolini's government believed gross overestimates of Italian military strength.
 - Mussolini's government claimed an air force of 8530 planes, large enough to blacken the sky and match the RAF. In fact it had 583 planes--a fact it learned only by dispatching fascist prefects to airfields to count the planes. Italy built more planes in World War I than World War II. The IAF was "at the level of a Balkan state" said an IAF commander after the war.
 - Mussolini doubled the number of divisions in Italy's army--by splitting them in half. He then forgot he had done this.
 - b. Mussolini's government believed gross overestimates of the value of empire. Specifically, that an empire in Africa could absorb 10 million Italians settlers. In fact it absorbed a few thousand.
- 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." This illusion had two effects:
 - a. Brits greatly feared war, as they feared immense near-

- nuclear-scale damage from bombing if war erupted.
- b. The Brit government, doubting that defense against bombers was possible, nearly cancelled its Spitfire fighter program. This would have been unwise: Spitfires won the Battle of Britain.
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 propoganda, 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 dominant deterrence model paradigm arose around Munich, but...
 - b. After WWI a dominant spiral model paradigm was inspired by 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 was absorbed in domestic left-right conflicts and unready for war. German rightists declared: "Better Hitler than (French socialist leader) Leon Blum!"

G. The Soviet Union was 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; hence it failed to pursue an alliance with Britain and France against Germany. This left 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. (Replaying Britain & Russia's withdrawal in 1866, 1870.)
- B. German rearmament, 1934-39--giving Germany an offensive capability and a fleeting military superiority.
 - Why didn't the allies prevent German rearmament? Would an allied preventive war in 1935-37 have prevented WWII? Churchill later said so.
- C. Hitler wins without a war: appeasement and peaceful German expansion.
 - 1. Hitler's recoveries and 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 and French credibility.
 - b. Hitler's bandwagon beliefs destroyed British and 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; and American non-strategy. Britain doesn't frame its strategy; America doesn't know its 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? Specifically, what if Germany, Britain, France and the Soviet Union had possessed nuclear second-strike capabilities?
- E. Hitler declares war on the United States, December 11, 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.
- 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 WORLD WAR II?

- A. Clearly, **German expansionism** caused the European war. But **what caused German expansionism?**
 - 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, expressed in Haffner, Meaning of Hitler, assigned.) (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 its 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 Germany's bad ideas of 1890-1914?
 - a. "Germans steeped in the militarist and hyper-nationalist ideas of 1890-1914 continued to believe these ideas after the war. Once polluted, German minds remained polluted." For example: Hitler himself was steeped in the crazed pre-1914 writings of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Gobineau, and Haushofer. See Carr, Hitler.
 - b. "The same German oligarchs who promoted hypernationalism and perhaps militarism before 1914 continued to purvey these ideas after 1918." See Stark, Entrepreneurs.
 2. Nationalist mythmaking? We saw plenty after 1918, especially in the form of German innocence propaganda. (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. Allied military inaction. Could an allied preventive war in 1935-37 have prevented WWII?
- D. Japanese Expansionism.
- E. Military factors: the security dilemma and its offspring.

VII. ESCALATION OF WWII: Windows, first strikes, security wars

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

IX. AFTERMATH OF WWII: A STABLE PEACE. WHY?

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