

A worldview...not a plan for taking power. The Judeobolshevik myth supplied an image of the enemy, but not a foreign policy. *Lebensraum* was a summons to empire, not a military strategy. The problem for Hitler the thinker was that German politics, neighboring states, and the European order could not be abolished by the stroke of a pen. After he left prison in 1924, Hitler learned some practical lessons, without ever changing his mind about the theory. As a young veteran of the First World War, Hitler could imagine that a dramatic gesture, a coup attempt in Munich in 1923, would suffice to transform Germany. In this he was wrong. He was defeated, and his comrade Scheubner-Richter was killed, by the forces of the state. Yet Hitler did come to power, a much cannier politician, ten years after his failed putsch. Then he and his party comrades, with considerable popular support, transformed the German state. Hitler could imagine that the Soviet Union was a cowardly Jewish coven. In this he was mistaken. Yet he did manage, eight years after winning power in Germany, to make war on Moscow and begin a Final Solution.

For Hitler's worldview to change the world, he had to become a new type of politician, practicing a new type of politics. For anarchy in theory to become extermination in practice, the German state had to be reshaped, and neighboring states had to be destroyed. For the Jews of Europe to be murdered, the states destroyed had to be the ones where Jews were citizens. The vast majority of European Jews lived beyond Germany, the largest number of them in Poland. Poland was not only the major homeland of the Jews, but also the country that separated Germany from the

Soviet Union. In one way or another, Poland had to figure in Hitler's plans to destroy the Jews and the Soviet state.

In the six years after Hitler came to power, he succeeded in altering the German state, but failed to recruit a Polish partner for his wars. Had Poland and Germany fought as allies against the Soviet Union in 1939, the result would no doubt have been disastrous for the Jews of Europe. The Holocaust as we know it, however, followed instead a German-Soviet war against Poland. That the Second World War began as and when it did—as a campaign of state destruction and national extermination against Poland in September 1939—was a result of Hitler's success at home, his failure to sway Poland to his dream of foreign conquest, and the willingness of the Soviet leadership to join in a war of aggression.

At first glance, a German-Polish alliance would seem more plausible than a German-Soviet alliance. The Nazis and the Soviets spent the second half of the 1930s in a vituperative contest of propaganda, each presenting the other as the ultimate evil. Warsaw and Berlin seemed, by contrast, to have much in common. From 1935 to 1938, both Germany and Poland were central European states pressing territorial claims on their neighbors while boasting a grand rhetoric of global transformation. Leaders in both Berlin and Warsaw faulted the world order for constraining flows of food, raw materials, and human beings. Both placed the Jewish question at the center of their diplomatic rhetoric, suggesting that its resolution in Europe was a matter of international justice. Both emphasized the threat of Soviet communism.

Often the German decision to attack Poland in 1939 is explained in the terms provided by Hitler and his propagandists: by Berlin's campaign for adjustments to the border, or by Warsaw's resistance to them. This had almost nothing to do with it. In fact, the war between Germany and Poland resulted from deep differences on the Jewish and Soviet questions that were shrouded for years by Polish diplomacy. Hitler was willing to treat Warsaw as an ally in his grander campaigns against Moscow; and against Jews, and also willing to destroy it entirely when such an alliance came to seem implausible, as it did in early 1939. Either way, Hitler saw Poland only as an element in his own master plan: as a helper in his grand

eastern war, or as a territory from which that war could be launched. Hitler gave much more thought to the first variant than to the second, which was an improvisation that followed rapidly upon the surprising failure of German-Polish diplomacy in early 1939. All the while, Poland was an actor with its own aims and purposes. Germany and Poland ended up thwarting each other because German and Polish foreign policy were built upon a very different analysis of global politics and the role of the state.

Berlin's global position after Hitler's rise to power might be characterized as *recolonial*. Empires as such were just and good; the best empires were racial; Britain and America were rival exemplars of racial mastery; a German empire would restore balance to the world. The globe was naturally a world of competing empires; what was unnatural was the existence of a Jewish empire—the Soviet Union—and Jewish influence in London, Washington, Paris, and elsewhere. Germany would make a redeemerly racial empire by displacing a decadent Jewish dominion. In Hitler's mind, Poland's place in such a recolonial project was to help Germany: during the war as an ally or benign neutral, afterward as a satellite or puppet. In this conception no violent changes in the German-Polish border were needed, since Poland could grant territory to Germany in exchange for some of the booty in their joint conquest of the USSR. In the end this would be meaningless since Poland would fall under the thrall of Germany during the war itself.

Warsaw's global attitude, by contrast, might be called *decolonial*. Poland's history was one of destruction of an ancient Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by surrounding empires in 1795 and the creation of a nation-state in 1918. As Poles saw matters, empires had no special legitimacy, and as a matter of historical logic and justice were giving way to nation-states. Empires might be destroyed, as the Nazis thought; but if so, they would be replaced by nation-states rather than racial regimes. All nations were more or less equal actors in history, striving towards freedom. Most leading Polish politicians were attached to the nation-state as an intrinsic value and a collective achievement of the recent past. The unglamorous conservative definition of the state, the monopolist of violence and the enforcer of laws, was for many Poles a precious and unlikely achievement. No Polish leader, despite a grandiosity of rhetoric about foreign policy, imagined that Poland would displace one of the world powers.

Unlike Hitler and some of the Nazis, the Polish leadership had no theory about the secret leadership of the USSR or all empires by Jews and no illusions about the hidden fragility of the great powers. The imperial system, of which the USSR was a more or less normal part, would eventually give way to national liberation. In the meantime, maritime empires such as Britain and France had to open themselves to the resettlement of millions of Polish Jews. Warsaw hoped that Polish Jews would rebel against empires and form Polish-Jewish states that would somehow extend Polish influence in any site of settlement—least implausibly Palestine. Israel was as far as Warsaw's dreaming went.

Both Berlin and Warsaw supported the removal of millions of Jews from Europe. For Hitler, this was part of a vast project of ecological restoration, in which the elimination of Jews after a German victory would repair the planet. The German state was a means to an end; it could and would be mutated and then put at risk. Antisemitism likely had more popular resonance in Poland than in Germany, at least before 1933, but no one with ideas similar to Hitler's came close to achieving power in Warsaw. Whereas German policy involved the destruction of states where Jews lived, Polish policy sought the creation of a state for the Jews. The covert essence of German foreign policy in the late 1930s was the ambition to build a vast racial empire in eastern Europe; the covert essence of Polish foreign policy was to create a State of Israel in Palestine from the territories granted by a League of Nations mandate to the British Empire.

The Nazi recolonial and the Polish decolonial mindsets were each, in their different ways, quite radical. Each was a challenge to the imperial order as it stood, the first envisioning its refoundation on the racial principle, the second its inevitable replacement by postcolonial states. The foreign policies they generated could seem rather similar, especially to a *Führer* in Berlin who thought that he needed allies. At a crucial level of political theory, however, the opposition could hardly have been more basic: rejection versus endorsement of the traditional state.

This fundamental difference in attitudes about the state arose in large measure from opposing experiences and interpretations of the First World War. It was a basic cause of the Second. For Polish patriots, 1918 was a year of miracles, when an independent Polish state, absent from the maps of Europe for more than a century, arose again. For Germans, 1918 was a year of the unimaginable military defeat, followed in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles and humiliating territorial concessions—largely to the new Poland

Both Poland and Germany being sovereign Governments, it is understood, of course, that, upon resort to any one of the alternatives I suggest, each nation will agree to accord complete respect to the independence and territorial integrity of the other.

The people of the United States are as one in their opposition to policies of military conquest and domination. They are as one in rejecting the thesis that any ruler or any people possess the right to achieve their ends or objectives through the taking of action which will plunge countless millions into war, and which will bring distress and suffering to every nation of the world, belligerent and neutral, when such ends and objectives, so far as they are just and reasonable, can be satisfied through the processes of peaceful negotiation or by resort to judicial arbitration.

I appeal to you in the name of the people of the United States, and I believe in the name of peace-loving men and women everywhere, to agree to a solution of the controversies existing between your Government and that of Poland through the adoption of one of the alternative methods I have proposed.

I need hardly reiterate that should the Governments of Germany and Poland be willing to solve their differences in the peaceful manner suggested, the Government of the United States still stands prepared to contribute its share to the solution of the problems which are endangering world peace in the form set forth in my message of the 14th April.

In the message which I sent you on the 14th April, I stated that it appeared to be that the leaders of great nations had it in their power to liberate their peoples from the disaster that impended, but that, unless the effort were immediately made, and with goodwill on all sides, to find a peaceful and constructive solution of existing controversies, the crisis which the world was confronting must end in catastrophe. Today that catastrophe appears to be very near – at hand, indeed.

To the message which I sent you last April I have received no reply, but because my confident belief that the cause of world peace – which is the cause of humanity itself – rises above all other considerations I am again addressing myself to you, with the hope that the war which impends and the consequent disaster to all peoples may yet be averted.

I therefore urge with all earnestness – and I am likewise urging the President of the Republic of Poland – that the Governments of Germany and Poland agree by common accord to refrain from any positive act of hostility for a reasonable stipulated period, and that they agree, likewise by common accord, to solve the controversies which have arisen between them by one of the three following methods:

First, by direct negotiation;

Second, by the submission of these controversies to an impartial arbitration in which they

an both have confidence; or

Third, that they agree to the solution of these controversies through the procedure of conciliation, selecting as a conciliator or moderator a national of one of the American Republics, which are all of them free from any connection with, or participation in, European political affairs.

President Roosevelt's mediation efforts

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945) made a last-minute appeal to Hitler to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Polish crisis in late August 1939. Hitler did postpone the attack on Poland, originally scheduled for 26 August, to 1 September, not because of the American appeal, but because Britain made clear its intention to stand by Poland. By insisting on 30 August that Poland send an emissary with full plenipotentiary powers to Berlin within 24 hours, Hitler deliberately blocked negotiations that would very likely have led to some Polish territorial concessions. But for Hitler the war was not about Danzig or the Polish Corridor. It was about gaining *Lebensraum* and a free hand to establish a new order in Europe under German domination.

4.22a Message from President Roosevelt to Herr Hitler, 24 August 1939

In the message which I sent you on the 14th April, I stated that it appeared to be that the leaders of great nations had it in their power to liberate their peoples from the disaster that impended, but that, unless the effort were immediately made, and with goodwill on all sides, to find a peaceful and constructive solution of existing controversies, the crisis which the world was confronting must end in catastrophe. Today that catastrophe appears to be very near – at hand, indeed.

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4.22b President Roosevelt's Second Appeal to Herr Hitler, 25 August 1939

I have this hour received from the President of Poland a reply to the message which I addressed to your Excellency and to him last night.

(The text of President Moscicki's reply is then given. President Roosevelt continues as follows): Your Excellency has repeatedly publicly stated that the aims and objects sought by the German Reich were just and reasonable.

In his reply to my message the President of Poland has made it plain that the Polish Government is willing, upon the basis set forth in my message, to agree to solve the controversy which has arisen between the Republic of Poland and the German Reich by direct negotiation or the process of conciliation.

Countless human lives can yet be saved and hope may still be restored that the nations of the modern world may even now construct the foundation for a peaceful and happier relationship, if you and the Government of the German Reich will agree to the pacific means of settlement accepted by the Government of Poland. All the world prays that Germany, too, will accept.

Source: Office of the US Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Vol. VIII (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), pp. 475–7 [Doc. TC-72 Nos. 124 and 127].

Italy backs out

Hitler's Fascist ally Mussolini made it clear that while he supported the German cause, he was not ready to enter the war. Earlier discussions between German and Italian military leaders had been predicated on the assumption that war with the West, which Mussolini, too, considered inevitable at some point, would not come until 1942–43.

4.23 Telegram from the German Embassy in Rome to Ribbentrop,**27 August 1939****TOP SECRET**

To: Reich Foreign Minister

As already announced by phone, I have transmitted the reply letter of Hitler to Duce in presence of Ciano at 0910 hours. The Duce will reply quickly and confirm that he will comply with Hitler's wishes 100%, and that he stands with him in complete solidarity. As far as the desired tying down of English-French forces is concerned, the military measures already taken by the Italians are above suitable to tie down, according to a conservative estimate, at least 300,000 opponents along the line Alps, Corsica, Tunisia ...

The Duce then referred again, with emphasis, to his view, already aired yesterday, that he still believed in the possibility of reaching our goals without armed conflict. He therefore decided to mention that, also, in his intended letter to Hitler, it is probably so, that a delay of 3-4 years of the war with the Western powers, which in his opinion, too, is unavoidable, would change the prospects, for him as for us completely. Field Marshall Goering had talked to him about 4 years for us some time ago. And even in talks to him about Pariani-Keitel the latter had considered a period of several years necessary to bring us to the apex of military efficiency. But even a delay of several months would be a gain ...

Source: Office of the US Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality,

(Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 452 [Doc. 2817-PS]