

Origins of the Second World War

Destroying these legends is not a vindication of Hitler. It is a service to historical truth, and my book should be challenged only on this basis, not for the political morals which people choose to draw from it. This book is not a contribution to "revisionism" except in the lesser sense of suggesting that Hitler used different methods from those usually attributed to him. I have never seen any sense in the question of war guilt or war innocence. In a world of sovereign states, each does the best it can for its own interests; and can be criticised at most for mistakes, not for crimes. Bismarck, as usual, was right when he said of the Austro-Prussian war in 1868: "Austria was no more in the wrong in opposing our claims than we were in making them". As a private citizen, I think that all this striving after greatness and domination is idiotic; and I should like my country not to take part in it. As a historian, I recognise that Powers will be Powers. My book has really little to do with Hitler. The vital question, it seems to me, concerns Great Britain and France. They were the victors of the first World war. They had the decision in their hands. It was perfectly obvious that Germany would seek to become a Great Power again; obvious after 1938 that her domination would be of a peculiarly barbaric sort. Why did the victors not resist her? There are various answers: timidity; blindness; moral doubts; desire perhaps to turn German strength against Soviet Russia. But whatever the answers, this seems to me the important question, and my book revolves round it, though also of course round the other question: why did they resist in the end?

Still, some critics made a great fuss about Hitler, attributing to him sole responsibility for the war or something near it. I will therefore discuss Hitler's part a little more, though not in a polemical spirit. I have no desire to win, only to get things right. The current versions of Hitler are, I think, two. In one view, he wanted a great war for its own sake. No doubt he also thought vaguely of the results: Germany the greatest Power in the world, and himself a world conqueror on the pattern of Alexander the Great or Napoleon. But mainly he wanted war for the general destruction of men and societies which it would cause. He was a maniac, a nihilist, a second Attila. The other view makes him more rational and, in a sense, more constructive. In this view, Hitler had a coherent, longterm plan of an original nature which he pursued with unwavering persistence. For the sake of this plan he sought power; and it shaped all his foreign policy. He intended to give Germany a great colonial empire in eastern Europe by defeating Soviet Russia, exterminating all the inhabitants, and then planting the vacant territory with Germans. This Reich of a hundred or two hundred million Germans would last a thousand years. I am surprised, incidentally, that the advocates of this view did not applaud my book. For surely, if Hitler were planning a great war against Soviet Russia, his war against the western Powers was a mistake. There is evidently some point here which I have not understood.

Now, of course Hitler speculated a good deal about what he was doing, much as academic observers try to put coherence into the acts of contemporary statesmen. Maybe the world would have been saved a lot of trouble if Hitler could have been given a job in some German equivalent of Chatham House, where he could have speculated harmlessly for the rest of his life. As it was, he became involved in the world of action; and here, I think, he exploited events far more than he followed precise coherent plans. The story of how he came to power in Germany seems to me relevant to his later behaviour in international affairs. He announced persistently that he intended to seize power and would then do great things. Many people believed him. The elaborate plot by which Hitler seized power was the first legend to be established about him and has been the first also to be destroyed. There was no long-term plot; there was no seizure of power. Hitler had no idea how he would come to power; only a conviction that he would get there. Papen and a few other conservatives put Hitler into power by intrigue, in the belief that they had taken him prisoner. He exploited their intrigue, again with no idea how he would escape from their control, only with the conviction that somehow he would. This "revision" does not "vindicate" Hitler, though it discredits Papen and his associates. It is merely revision for its own sake, or rather for the sake of historical truth.

Hitler in power had once more no idea how he would pull Germany out of the Depression, only a determination to do it. Much of the recovery was natural, due to the general upturn in world conditions which was already beginning before Hitler gained power. Hitler himself contributed two things. One was anti-semitism. This, to my mind, was the one thing in which he persistently and genuinely believed from his beginning in Munich until his last days in the bunker. His advocacy of it would have deprived him of support, let alone power, in a civilised country. Economically, it was irrelevant, indeed harmful. His other contribution was to encourage public spending on roads and buildings. According to the only book which has looked at what happened instead of repeating what Hitler and others said was happening¹, German recovery was caused by the return of private consumption and nonwar types of investment to the prosperity levels of 1928 and 1929. Rearmament had little to do with it. Until the spring of 1936, "rearmament was largely a myth".² Hitler in fact did not apply any prepared economic plans. He did the nearest thing that came to hand.

The same point is illustrated in the story of the Reichstag fire. Everyone knows the legend. The Nazis wanted an excuse for introducing Exceptional Laws of political dictatorship; and themselves set fire to the Reichstag in order to provide this excuse. Perhaps Goebbels arranged the fire, perhaps Goering; perhaps Hitler himself did not know about the plan beforehand. At any rate somehow, the Nazis did it. This legend has now been shot to pieces by Fritz Tobias, in my opinion decisively.³ The Nazis had nothing to do with the burning of the Reichstag. The young Dutchman, van der Lubbe, did it all alone, exactly as he claimed. Hitler and the other Nazis were taken by surprise. They genuinely believed that the Communists had started the fire; and they introduced the Exceptional Laws because they genuinely believed that they were threatened with a Communist rising. Certainly there was a prepared list of those who should be arrested. But not prepared by the Nazis. It had been prepared by Goering's predecessor: the Social Democrat, Severing. Here again there is no "vindication" of Hitler, only a revision of his methods. He expected an opportunity to turn up; and one did. Of course the Communists, too, had nothing to do with the burning of the Reichstag. But Hitler thought they had. He was able to exploit the Communist danger so effectively largely because he believed in it himself. This, too, provides a parallel with Hitler's attitude later in

¹ Burton H. Klein, *Germany's Economic Preparations for War* (1959.) Mr. Klein is an economist with the RAND Corporation.

² Klein, p. 18-17.

³ Fritz Tobias, *Reichstagbrand* (1962).

international affairs. When other countries thought that he was preparing aggressive war against them, Hitler was equally convinced that these others intended to prevent the restoration of Germany as an independent Great Power. His belief was not altogether unfounded. At any rate, the British and French governments have often been condemned for not undertaking a preventive war in good time.

Here, it seems to me, is the key to the problem whether Hitler deliberately aimed at war. He did not so much aim at war as expect it to happen, unless he could evade it by some ingenious trick, as he had evaded civil war at home. Those who have evil motives easily attribute them to others; and Hitler expected others to do what he would have done in their place. England and France were "hate-inspired antagonists"; Soviet Russia was plotting the overthrow of European civilisation, an empty boast which indeed the Bolsheviks had often made; Roosevelt was out to ruin Europe. Hitler certainly directed his generals to prepare for war. But so did the British, and for that matter every other, government. It is the job of general staffs to prepare for war. The directives which they receive from their governments indicate the possible war for which they are to prepare, and are no proof that the government concerned have resolved on it. All the British directives from 1935 onwards were pointed solely against Germany; Hitler's were concerned only with making Germany stronger. If therefore we were (wrongly) to judge political intentions from military plans, the British government would appear set on war with Germany, not the other way round. But of course we apply to the behaviour of our own governments a generosity of interpretation which we do not extend to others. People regard Hitler as wicked; and then find proofs of his wickedness in evidence which they would not use against others. Why do they apply this double standard? Only because they assume Hitler's wickedness in the first place.

It is dangerous to deduce political intentions from military plans. Some historians, for instance, have deduced from the Anglo-French military conversations before 1914 that the British government were set on war with Germany. Other, and in my opinion wiser, historians have denied that this deduction can be drawn. The plans they argue, were precautions, not "blueprints for aggression". Yet Hitler's directives are often interpreted in this latter way. I will give one remarkable example. On 30 November 1938 Keitel sent to Ribbentrop a draft for Italo-German military talks which he had prepared on Hitler's instruction. Clause 8 read: "Military-political basis for the Negotiation. War by Germany and Italy against France and Britain, with the object first of knocking out France"¹ A responsible critic has claimed that this provides clear proof of Hitler's intentions and so destroys my entire thesis. Yet what could German and Italian generals talk about when they met, except war against France and Britain? This was the only war in which Italy was likely to be involved. British and French generals were discussing war against Germany and Italy at this very time. Yet this is not counted against them, still less against their governments. The subsequent history of Keitel's draft is instructive. The Italians not the Germans, had been pressing for military talks. As the draft had been prepared, nothing happened. When Hitler occupied Prague on 15 March 1939, the talks had still not been held. The Italians grew impatient. On 22 March Hitler ordered: "The military-political bases are to be *deferred* for the present"². Talks were held at last on 4 April. Keitel recorded: "The conversations were started somewhat suddenly in consequence of Italian pressure"³. It turned out that the Italians, far from wanting war, wished to insist that they could not be ready for war until 1942 at the earliest; and the German representatives agreed with them. Thus, this marvellous directive merely proves (if it proves anything) that Hitler was not interested at this time in war against France and Great Britain; and that Italy was not interested in war at all. Or maybe it shows that historians should be careful not to seize on an isolated clause in a document without reading further.

Of course, in British eyes, their government only wanted to keep things quiet, while Hitler wanted to stir them up. To the Germans, the *status quo* was not peace, but a slave treaty. It all depends on the point of view. The victor Powers wanted to keep the fruits of victory with some modifications, though they did it ineffectively. The vanquished Power wanted to undo its defeat. This latter ambition, whether "aggressive" or not, was not peculiar to Hitler. It was shared by all German politicians, by the Social Democrats who ended the war in 1918 as much as by Stresemann. No one defined precisely what undoing the defeat of the first World war meant; and this applies also to Hitler. It involved recovering the territory lost then; restoring the German predominance over central Europe which had previously been given by the alliance with Austria-Hungary; ending of course all restrictions on German armaments. The concrete terms did not matter. All Germans, including Hitler, assumed that Germany would become the dominant Power in Europe once she had undone her defeat, whether this happened by war or otherwise; and this assumption was generally shared in other countries. The two ideas of "liberation" and "domination" merged into one. There was no separating them. They were merely two different words for the same thing; and only use of the particular word decides whether Hitler was a champion of national justice or a potential conqueror of Europe.

A German writer⁴ has recently criticised Hitler for wanting to restore Germany as a Great Power at all. The first World war, this writer argues, had shown that Germany could not be an independent Power on a world scale; and Hitler was foolish to try. This is not much more than a platitude. The first World war shattered all the Great Powers involved, with the exception of the United States, who took virtually no part in it; maybe they were all foolish to go on trying to be Great Powers afterwards. Total war is probably beyond the strength of any Great Power. Now even preparations for such a war threaten to ruin the Great Powers who attempt them. Nor is this new. In the eighteenth century Frederick the Great led Prussia to the point of collapse in the effort to be a Great Power. The Napoleonic wars brought France down from her high estate in Europe, and she never recovered her former greatness. This is an odd, inescapable dilemma. Though the object of being a Great Power is to be able to fight a great war, the only way of remaining a Great Power is not to fight one, or to fight it on a limited scale. This was the secret of Great Britain's greatness so long as she stuck to naval

¹ Keitel to Ribbentrop, 30 Nov. 1938. *German Foreign Policy*, Series D, iv. No. 411.

² Keitel directive. 22 March, 1939. *Ibid.* vi. Appendix I.

³ Keitel report. 4 April, 1939. *Ibid.* Appendix I

⁴ Wolfgang Sauer in *die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung* (1960).

warfare and did not try to become a military power on the continental pattern. Hitler did not need instruction from a historian in order to appreciate this. The inability of Germany to fight a long war was a constant theme of his; and so was the danger which threatened Germany if the other Great Powers combined against her. In talking like this, Hitler was more sensible than the German generals who imagined that all would be well if they got Germany back to the position she occupied before Ludendorff's offensive in March 1918. Hitler did not however draw the moral that it was silly for Germany to be a Great Power. Instead he proposed to dodge the problem by ingenuity, much as the British had once done. Where they relied on sea power, he relied on guile. Far from wanting war, a general war was the last thing he wanted. He wanted the fruits of total victory without total war; and thanks to the stupidity of others he nearly got them. Other Powers thought that they were faced with the choice between total war and surrender. At first they chose surrender; then they chose total war, to Hitler's ultimate ruin.

This is not guesswork. It is demonstrated beyond peradventure by the record of German armament before the second World war or even during it. It would have been obvious long ago if men had not been blinded by two mistakes. Before the war they listened to what Hitler said instead of looking at what he did. After the war they wanted to pin on him the guilt for everything which happened, regardless of the evidence. This is illustrated, for example; by the almost universal belief that Hitler started the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, whereas it was started by the directors of British strategy, as some of the more honest among them have boasted. However, the record is there for anyone who wishes to use it, dispassionately analysed by Mr. Burton Klein. I have already quoted his conclusion for Hitler's first three years: until the spring of 1936 German rearmament was largely a myth. This does not mean merely that the preliminary stages of rearmament were not producing increased strength, as always happens. Even the preliminary stages were not being undertaken at all seriously. Hitler cheated foreign powers and the German people in exactly the opposite sense from that which is usually supposed. He, or rather Goering, announced: "Guns before butter". In fact, he put butter before guns. I take some figures at random from Mr. Klein's book. In 1936, according to Churchill, two independent estimates placed German rearmament expenditure at an annual rate of 12 thousand million marks.¹ The actual figure was under 5 thousand million. Hitler himself asserted that the Nazi government had spent 90 thousand million marks on armaments before the outbreak of war. In fact total German government expenditure, war and nonwar, did not amount to much more than this between 1933 and 1938. Rearmament cost about 40 thousand million marks in the six fiscal years ending 31 March 1939, and about 90 thousand millions up to the outbreak of war.²

Mr. Klein discusses why German rearmament was on such a limited scale. For one thing, Hitler was anxious not to weaken his popularity by reducing the standard of civilian life in Germany. The most rearmament did was to prevent its rising faster than it otherwise would have done. Even so the Germans were better off than they had ever been before. Then the Nazi system was inefficient, corrupt, and muddled. More important, Hitler would not increase taxes and yet was terrified of inflation. Even the overthrow of Schacht did not really shake the financial limitations, though it was supposed to do so. Most important of all, Hitler did not make large war preparations simply because his "concept of warfare did not require them". "Rather he planned to solve Germany's living-space problem in piecemeal fashion—by a series of small wars".³ This is the conclusion at which I also arrived independently from study of the political record, though I suspect that Hitler hoped to get by without war at all. I agree that there was no clear dividing line in his mind between political ingenuity and small wars, such as the attack on Poland. The one thing he did not plan was the great war, often attributed to him.

Pretending to prepare for a great war and not in fact doing it was an essential part of Hitler's political strategy; and those who sounded the alarm against him, such as Churchill, unwittingly did his work for him. The device was new and took everyone in. Previously governments spent more on armaments than they admitted, as most do to the present day. This was sometimes to deceive their own people; sometimes to deceive a potential enemy. In 1909, for instance, the German government were accused by many British people of secretly accelerating naval building without the approval of the Reichstag. The accusation was probably untrue. But it left a permanent legacy of suspicion that the Germans would do it again; and this suspicion was strengthened by the evasions of the disarmament imposed by the treaty of Versailles, which successive German governments practised, though to little advantage, after 1919. Hitler encouraged this suspicion and exploited it. There is a very good illustration. On 28 November 1934 Baldwin denied Churchill's statement that German air strength was equal to that of Great Britain's. Baldwin's figures were right; Churchill's, supplied by Professor Lindemann, were wrong. On 24 March 1935 Sir John Simon and Anthony Eden visited Hitler. He told them that the German air force was already equal to that of Great Britain, if not indeed superior. He was at once believed, and has been believed ever since. Baldwin was discredited. Panic was created. How was it possible that a statesman could exaggerate his armaments instead of concealing them? Yet this was what Hitler had done.

German rearmament was largely a myth until the spring of 1936. Then Hitler put some reality into it. His motive was principally fear of the Red Army; and of course Great Britain and France had begun to rearm also. Hitler in fact raced along with others, and not much faster. In October 1936 he told Goering to prepare the German army and German economy for war within four years, though he did not lay down any detailed requirements. In 1938-39, the last peacetime year, Germany spent on armament about 15% of her gross national product. The British proportion was almost exactly the same. German expenditure on armaments was actually cut down after Munich and remained at this lower level, so that British production of aeroplanes, for example, was way ahead of German by 1940. When war broke out in 1939, Germany had 1450 modern fighter planes and 800 bombers; Great Britain and France had 950 fighters and 1800 bombers. The Germans had 8500 tanks; Great Britain and France had 3850.⁴ In each case Allied intelligence estimated German strength at more than twice the true figure. As usual, Hitler was thought to have planned and prepared for a great war. In fact,

¹ Churchill, *The Second World War*, i. 226.

² Klein, 17.

³ Klein, 26.

⁴ Klein, 17.

he had not.

It may be objected that these figures are irrelevant. Whatever the deficiencies of German armament on paper, Hitler won a war against two European Great Powers when the test came. This is to go against Maitland's advice and to judge by what happened, not by what was expected to happen. Though Hitler won, he won by mistake—a mistake which he shared. Of course the Germans were confident that they could defeat Poland if they were left undisturbed in the west. Here Hitler's political judgement that the French would do nothing proved more accurate than the apprehensions of the German generals. But he had no idea that he would knock France out of the war when he invaded Belgium and Holland on 10 May 1940. This was a defensive move: to secure the Ruhr from Allied invasion. The conquest of France was an unforeseen bonus. Even after this Hitler did not prepare for a great war. He imagined that he could defeat Soviet Russia without serious effort as he had defeated France. German production of armaments was not reduced merely during the winter of 1940-41; it was reduced still more in the autumn of 1941 when the war against Russia had already begun. No serious change took place after the initial setback in Russia nor even after the catastrophe at Stalingrad. Germany remained with "a peacelike war economy". Only the British bombing attacks on German cities stimulated Hitler and the Germans to take war seriously. German war production reached its height just when Allied bombing did: in July 1944. Even in March 1945 Germany was producing substantially more military material than when she attacked Russia in 1941. From first to last, ingenuity, not military strength, was Hitler's secret of success. He was done for when military strength became decisive, as he had always known he would be.

Thus I feel justified in regarding political calculations as more important than mere strength in the period before the war. There was some change of emphasis in the summer of 1936. Then all the Powers, not merely Hitler, began to take war and preparations for war seriously into account. I erred in not stressing this change of 1936 more clearly, and perhaps in finding too much change in the autumn of 1937. This shows how difficult it is to shake off legends even when trying to do so. I was taken in by the Hossbach Memorandum. Though I doubted whether it was as important as most writers made out, I still thought that it must have some importance for every writer to make so much of it. I was wrong; and the critics were right who pointed back to 1936, though they did not apparently realise that, by doing this, they were discrediting the Hossbach memorandum. I had better discredit this "official record", as one historian has called it, a little further. The points are technical and may seem trivial to the general reader. Nevertheless scholars usually and rightly attach importance to such technicalities. In modern practice, an official record demands three things. First, a secretary must attend to take notes which he writes up afterwards in orderly form. Then his draft must be submitted to the participants for correction and approval. Finally, the record must be placed in the official files. None of this took place in regard to the meeting on 5 November 1937, except that Hossbach attended. He took no notes. Five days later he wrote an account of the meeting from memory in longhand. He twice offered to show the manuscript to Hitler, who replied that he was too busy to read it. This was curiously casual treatment for what is supposed to be his "last will and testament". Blomberg may have looked at the manuscript. The others did not know it existed. The only certificate of authenticity attached to it was the signature of Hossbach himself. One other man saw the manuscript: Beck, chief of the general staff, the most sceptical among German generals of Hitler's ideas. He wrote an answer to Hitler's arguments on 12 November 1937; and this answer was later presented as the beginning of the German "resistance". It has even been suggested that Hossbach wrote the memorandum in order to provoke the answer.

These are speculations. At the time, no one attached importance to the meeting. Hossbach left the staff soon afterwards. His manuscript was put in a file with other miscellaneous papers, and forgotten. In 1943 a German officer, Count Kirchbach, looked through the file, and copied the manuscript for the department of military history. After the war, the Americans found Kirchbach's copy, and copied it in their turn for the prosecution at Nuremberg. Both Hossbach and Kirchbach thought that this copy was shorter than the original. In particular, according to Kirchbach, the original contained criticisms by Neurath, Blomberg, and Fritsch of Hitler's argument—criticisms which have now fallen out. Maybe the Americans "edited" the document; maybe Kirchbach, like other Germans, was trying to shift all the blame on to Hitler. There are no means of knowing. Hossbach's original and Kirchbach's copy have both disappeared. All that survives is a copy, perhaps shortened, perhaps "edited", of a copy of an unauthenticated draft. It contains themes which Hitler also used in his public speeches: the need for *Lebensraum*, and his conviction that other countries would oppose the restoration of Germany as an independent Great Power. It contains no directives for action beyond a wish for increased armaments. Even at Nuremberg the Hossbach memorandum was not produced in order to prove Hitler's war guilt. That was taken for granted. What it "proved", in its final concocted form, was that those accused at Nuremberg—Goering, Raeder, and Neurath—had sat by and approved of Hitler's aggressive plans. It had to be assumed that the plans were aggressive in order to prove the guilt of the accused. Those who believe the evidence in political trials may go on quoting the Hossbach memorandum. They should also warn their readers (as the editors of the *Documents on German Foreign Policy* for example do not) that the memorandum, far from being an "official record", is a very hot potato.¹

The Hossbach memorandum is not the only alleged blue print of Hitler's intentions. Indeed, to judge from what some historians say, Hitler produced such blueprints continually—influenced no doubt by his ambition to be an architect (yet another goak). These historians even underrate Hitler's productivity. They jump straight from *Mein Kampf* to the Hossbach memorandum, and then to the *Table Talk* during the Russian war.² In fact Hitler produced a blueprint nearly every time he made a speech; this was the way his mind

¹ Hoasbach's account: affidavit In *International Military Tribunal*, xlii, 228, and, with variants, in Hossbach, *Von der militärischen Verantwortlichkeit in der Zeit vor dem zweiten Weltkreig* (1948), 28. Kirchbach's copy and subsequent doubts: G. Meinek, *Hitler und die deutsche Aufrüstung 1933-37*, (1956), 286. Beck's counter-memorandum in: W. Foerster, *Ein General kampft gegen den Krieg* (1949), 82. Beginning of the Resistance: Hans Rothfels, *Die deutsche Opposition gegen Hitler* (1951), 71. At Nuremberg, Blomberg, Goering, and Neurath testified against the authenticity of the memorandum. Their testimony is generally held to be worthless; or rather of worth only so far as it tells against Hitler.

² Now they can halt also at Hitler's second or, as it is called in the English edition, his secret book, which he wrote in 1928 and which remained unpublished until recently. Of course there is nothing secret about it. It is a rehash of the speeches which he was making at the time; Origins of the Second World War

worked. Obviously there was nothing secret about these blueprints either in *Mein Kampf* which sold by the million after Hitler came to power, or in speeches delivered to large audiences. No one therefore need pride himself on his perspicacity in divining Hitler's intentions. It is equally obvious that *Lebensraum* always appeared as one element in these blueprints. This was not an original idea of Hitler's. It was a commonplace of the time. *Volk ohne Raum*, for instance, by Hans Grimm sold much better than *Mein Kampf* when it was published in 1928. For that matter, plans for acquiring new territory were much aired in Germany during the first World war. It used to be thought that these were the plans of a few crack-pot theorists or of extremist organisations. Now we know better. In 1961 a German professor reported the result of his investigations into German war aims.¹ These were indeed "a blue print for aggression" or, as the professor called them, "a grasp at world power": Belgium under German control; the French iron-fields annexed to Germany; the Ukraine to become German; and, what is more, Poland and the Ukraine to be cleared of their inhabitants and to be resettled with Germans. These plans were not merely the work of the German general staff. They were endorsed by the German foreign office and by "the good German", Bethmann Hollweg. Hitler, far from transcending his respectable predecessors, was actually being more moderate than they when he sought only *Lebensraum* in the east and repudiated, in *Mein Kampf*, gains in the west. Hitler merely repeated the ordinary chatter of Rightwing circles. Like all demagogues, Hitler appealed to the masses. Unlike other demagogues, who sought power to carry out Left policies, Hitler dominated the masses by Leftwing methods in order to deliver them to the Right. This is why the Right let him in.

But was *Lebensraum* Hitler's sole idea or indeed the one which dominated his mind? To judge from *Mein Kampf*, he was obsessed by anti-semitism, which occupies most of the book. *Lebensraum* gets only seven of the seven hundred pages. Then and thereafter, it was thrown in as a final rationalisation, a sort of "pie in the sky" to justify what Hitler was supposed to be up to. Perhaps the difference between me and the believers in Hitler's constant plan for *Lebensraum* is over words. By "plan" I understand something which is prepared and worked out in detail. They seem to take "plan" as a pious, or in this case impious, wish. In my sense Hitler never had a plan for *Lebensraum*. There was no study of the resources in the territories that were to be conquered; no definition even of what these territories were to be. There was no recruitment of a staff to carry out these "plans", no survey of Germans who could be moved, let alone any enrolment. When large parts of Soviet Russia were conquered, the administrators of the conquered territories found themselves running round in circles, unable to get any directive whether they were to exterminate the existing populations or to exploit them, whether to treat them as friends or enemies.

Hitler certainly thought that Germany was most likely to make gains in eastern Europe when she became again a Great Power. This was partly because of his belief in *Lebensraum*. There were more practical considerations. For a long time he thought, whether mistakenly or not, that it would be easier to defeat Soviet Russia than the Western Powers. Indeed, he half believed that Bolshevism might break down without a war, a belief shared by many western statesmen. Then he could collect his gains with no effort at all. Moreover *Lebensraum* could easily be presented as an anti-Bolshevik crusade; and thus helped to win the hearts of those in western countries who regarded Hitler as the champion of Western civilisation. However he was not dogmatic about this. He did not refuse other gains when they came along. After the defeat of France, he annexed Alsace and Lorraine, despite his previous declarations that he would not do so; and he carried off the industrial regions of Belgium and north-eastern France for good measure, just as Bethmann had intended to do before him. The rather vague terms which he projected for peace with Great Britain in the summer of 1940 included a guarantee for the British Empire, but he also intended to claim Irak, and perhaps Egypt, as a German sphere. Thus, whatever his theories, he did not adhere in practice to the logical pattern of *status quo* in the west and gains in the east. The abstract speculator turned out to be also a statesman on the make who did not consider beforehand what he would make or how.

He got as far as he did because others did not know what to do with him. Here again I want to understand the "appeasers", not to vindicate or to condemn them. Historians do a bad day's work when they write the appeasers off as stupid or as cowards. They were men confronted with real problems, doing their best in the circumstances of their time. They recognised that an independent and powerful Germany had somehow to be fitted into Europe. Later experience suggests that they were right. At any rate, we are still going round and round the German problem. Can any sane man suppose, for instance, that other countries could have intervened by armed force in 1938 to overthrow Hitler when he had come to power by constitutional means and was apparently supported by a large majority of the German people? Could anything have been designed to make him more popular in Germany, unless perhaps it was intervening to turn him out of the Rhineland in 1936? The Germans put Hitler into power; they were the only ones who could turn him out. Again the "appeasers" feared that the defeat of Germany would be followed by a Russian domination over much of Europe. Later experience suggests that they were right here also. Only those who wanted Soviet Russia to take the place of Germany are entitled to condemn the "appeasers"; and I cannot understand how most of those who condemn them are now equally indignant at the inevitable result of their failure.

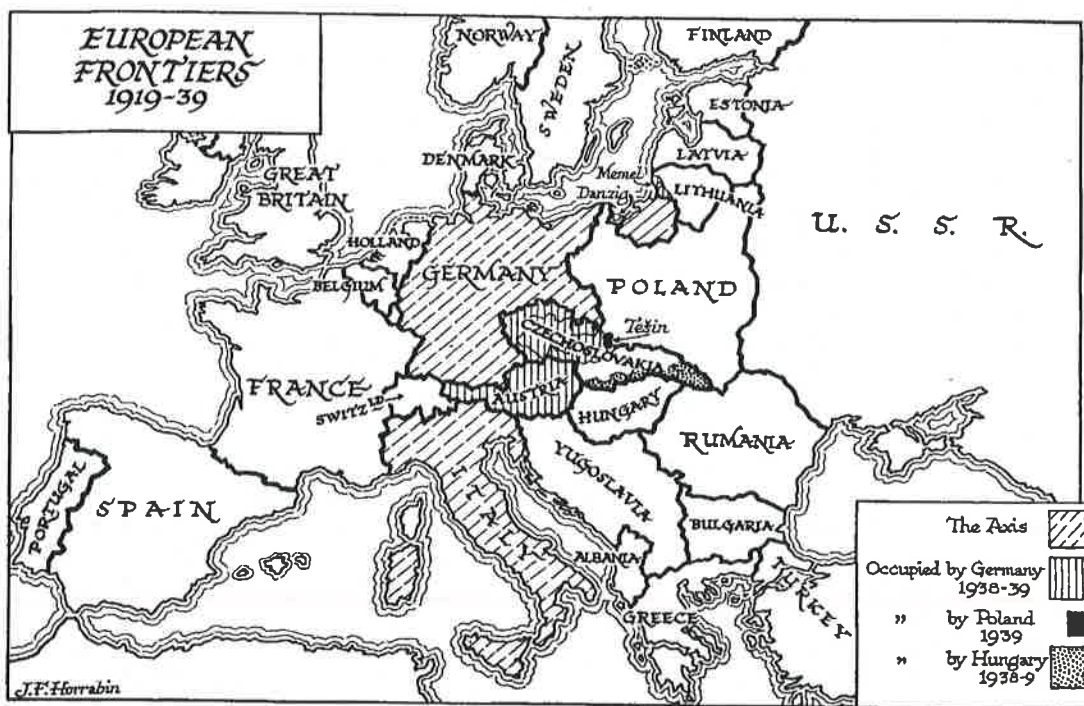
Nor is it true that the "appeasers" were a narrow circle, widely opposed at the time. To judge by what is said now, one would suppose that practically all Conservatives were for strenuous resistance to Germany in alliance with Soviet Russia and that all the Labour party were clamouring for great armaments. On the contrary, few causes have been more popular. Every newspaper in the country applauded the Munich settlement with the exception of *Reynolds' News*. Yet so powerful are the legends that even when I write this sentence down I can hardly believe it. Of course the "appeasers" thought firstly of their own countries as most statesmen do and are usually praised for doing. But they thought of others also. They doubted whether the peoples of eastern Europe would be best served by war. The British stand in September 1939 was no doubt heroic; but it was heroism mainly at the expense of others. The British people suffered comparatively little during six years of war. The Poles suffered catastrophe during the war, and did not regain

and it was unpublished merely because it was not worth publishing. The "secret" is typical of the romantic fancies with which everything to do with Hitler is treated.

¹ Fritz Fischer, *Gruff nach der Weltmacht* (1961).
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their independence after it. In 1938 Czechoslovakia was betrayed. In 1939 Poland was saved. Less than one hundred thousand Czechs died during the war. Six and a half million Poles were killed. Which was better—to be a betrayed Czech or a saved Pole? I am glad Germany was defeated and Hitler destroyed. I also appreciate that others paid the price for this, and I recognise the honesty of those who thought the price too high.

These are controversies which should now be discussed in historical terms. It would be easy to draw up an indictment of the appeasers. Maybe I lost interest from having often done so already at a time when, to the best of my recollection, those who now display indignation against me were not active on the public platform. I am more interested to discover why the things I wanted did not work out than in repeating the old denunciations; and if I am to condemn any mistakes, I prefer to condemn my own. However it is no part of a historian's duty to say what ought to have been done. His sole duty is to find out what was done and why. Little can be discovered so long as we go on attributing everything that happened to Hitler. He supplied a powerful dynamic element, but it was fuel to an existing engine. He was in part the creation of Versailles, in part the creation of ideas that were common in contemporary Europe. Most of all, he was the creation of German history and of the German present. He would have counted for nothing without the support and co-operation of the German people. It seems to be believed nowadays that Hitler did everything himself, even driving the trains and filling the gas chambers unaided. This was not so. Hitler was a sounding board for the German nation. Thousands, many hundred thousand, Germans carried out his evil orders without qualm or question. As supreme ruler of Germany, Hitler bears the greatest responsibility for acts of immeasurable evil: for the destruction of German democracy; for the concentration camps; and, worst of all, for the extermination of peoples during the second World war. He gave orders, which Germans executed, of a wickedness without parallel in civilised history. His foreign policy was a different matter. He aimed to make Germany the dominant Power in Europe and maybe, more remotely, in the world. Other Powers have pursued similar aims, and still do. Other Powers treat smaller countries as their satellites. Other Powers seek to defend their vital interests by force of arms. In international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German.



CHAPTER ONE Forgotten Problem

More than twenty years have gone by since the second World war began, fifteen since it ended. Those who lived through it still feel it as part of their immediate experience. One day they suddenly realise that the second World war, like its predecessor, has passed into history. This moment comes for a university teacher when he has to remind himself that his students were not born when the war started and cannot remember even its end. The second World war is as remote to them as the Boer war was to him; they may have heard anecdotes of it from their parents, but more likely, they have to learn of it from books if they learn at all. The great figures have left the scene. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Roosevelt are dead; Churchill has withdrawn from leadership; only de Gaulle is having a second innings. The second World war has ceased to be "today" and has become "yesterday". This makes new demands on historians. Contemporary history, in the strict sense, records events while they are still hot, judging them from the moment and assuming a ready sympathy in the reader. No one will depreciate such works with the great example of Sir Winston Churchill before him. But there comes a time when the historian can stand back and review events that were once contemporary with the detachment that he would show if he were writing of the Investiture conflict or the English civil war. At least, he can try.

Historians attempted this after the first World war, but with a different emphasis. There was relatively little interest in the war itself. The dispute over grand strategy between Westerners and Easterners was regarded as a private war between Lloyd George and the