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The Second World War

The demonstration that the European age was at last over was made in another world war. It began (in 1939) like its predecessor, as a European struggle, and like it became a combination of wars. To a far greater degree than any of its predecessors, it made unprecedented demands; this time they were on a scale which left nothing untouched, unmobilized, undisturbed. It was realistically termed 'total' war.

By 1939, there were already many signs for those with eyes to see that a historical era was ending. Though 1919 had brought a few last extensions of territorial control by colonial powers, the behaviour of the greatest of them, Great Britain, showed that imperialism was on the defensive, if not already in retreat. The vigour of Japan meant that Europe was no longer the only focus of the international power system; a prescient South African statesman said as early as 1921 that 'the scene has shifted away from Europe to the East and to the Pacific'. His prediction now seems more than ever justified and it was made when the likelihood that China might soon again exercise her due weight was far from obvious. Ten years after he spoke, the economic foundations of western preponderance had been shaken even more plainly than the political; the United States, greatest of industrial powers, had still 10 million unemployed. Though none of the European industrial countries was by then in quite such straits, the confidence which took for granted the health of the basic foundations of the economic system had evaporated for ever. Industry might be picking up in some countries – largely because rearmament was stimulating it – but attempts to find recovery by international co-operation came to an end when a World Economic Conference broke down in 1933. After that, each nation had gone its own way; even the United Kingdom at last abandoned free trade. *Laissez-faire* was dead, even if people still talked about it. Governments were by 1939 deliberately interfering with their economies as they had not done since the heyday of mercantilism.

If the political and economic assumptions of the nineteenth century had gone, so too had many others. It is more difficult to speak of intellectual

and spiritual trends than of political and economic, but though many people still clung to old shibboleths, for the élite which led thought and opinion the old foundations were no longer firm. Many people still attended religious services – though only a minority, even in Roman Catholic countries – but the masses of the industrial cities lived in a post-Christian world in which the physical removal of the institutions and symbols of religion would have made little difference to their daily lives. So did intellectuals; they perhaps faced an even greater problem than that of loss of religious belief, because many of the liberal ideas which had helped to displace Christianity from the eighteenth century were by now being displaced in their turn. In the 1920s and 1930s, the liberal certainties of the autonomy of the individual, objective moral criteria, rationality, the authority of parents and an explicable, mechanical universe all seemed to be going under along with the belief in free trade.

The symptoms were most obvious in the arts. For three or four centuries, since the age of humanism, Europeans had believed that the arts expressed aspirations, insights and pleasures accessible in principle to ordinary men, even though they might be raised to an exceptional degree of fineness in execution, or be especially concentrated in form so that not all individual men would always enjoy them. At any rate, it was possible for the whole of that time to retain the notion of the cultivated man who, given time and study, could discriminate with taste among the arts of his time because they were expressions of a shared culture with shared standards. This idea was somewhat weakened when the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Romantic movement, came to idealize the artist as genius – Beethoven was one of the first examples – and formulated the notion of the *avant-garde*.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, though, it was already very difficult for even trained eyes and ears to recognize art in much of what was done by contemporary artists. The most vivid symbol of this was the dislocation of the image in painting. Here, the flight from the representational still kept a tenuous link with tradition as late as Cubism, but by then it had long ceased to be apparent to the average ‘cultivated man’ – if he still existed. Artists retired into a less and less accessible chaos of private visions, whose centre was reached in the world of Dada and Surrealism. The years after 1918 are of the greatest interest as something of a culmination of disintegration in the arts; in Surrealism even the notion of the objective disappeared, let alone its representation. As one Surrealist put it, the movement meant ‘thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations’. Through chance, symbolism, shock, suggestion and violence the Surrealists sought to go beyond

consciousness itself. In so doing, they were only exploring what many writers and musicians were trying to do at the same time.

Such phenomena provide evidence in widely different forms of the decay of the liberal culture which was the final outcome of the high civilization of the European age. It is significant that such disintegratory movements were often prompted by a sense that the traditional culture had been too limited in its exclusion of the resources of emotion and experience which lay in the unconscious. Probably few of the artists who would have agreed with this would actually have read the work of the man who, more than any other, gave the twentieth century a language and stock of metaphors with which to explore this area and the confidence that it was there that the secrets of life lay.

This was Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. He thought he had a place in the history of culture beside Copernicus or Darwin, for he changed the way educated men thought of themselves. Freud himself made conscious comparisons, describing the idea of the unconscious as the third great 'insult' to the narcissism of humanity, after those delivered by heliocentricity and evolutionary theory. He introduced several new ideas into ordinary discourse: the special meanings we now give to the words 'complex' and 'obsession', and the appearance of the familiar terms 'Freudian slip' and 'libido' are monuments to the power of his teaching. His influence quickly spread into literature, personal relations, education and politics. Like the words of many prophets, his message was often distorted. What he was believed to have said was much more important than the specific clinical studies which were his contribution to science. Like that of Newton and Darwin, Freud's importance lay beyond science – where his influence was less than theirs – in providing a new mythology. It was to prove highly corrosive.

The message men took from Freud suggested that the unconscious was the real source of most significant behaviour, that moral values and attitudes were projections of the influences which had moulded this unconscious, that, therefore, the idea of responsibility was at best a myth and probably a dangerous one, and that perhaps rationality itself was an illusion. It did not matter much that Freud's own assertions would have been nonsense had this been true. This was what many people believed he had proved – and many still believe. Such a bundle of ideas called into question the very foundation of liberal civilization itself, the idea of the rational, responsible, consciously motivated individual, and this was its general importance.

Freud's teaching was not the only intellectual force contributing to the loss of certainty and the sense that men had little firm ground beneath their

feet. But it was the most apparent in the intellectual life of the inter-war period. From grappling with the insights he brought, or with the chaos of the arts, or with the incomprehensibility of a world of science which seemed suddenly to have abandoned Laplace and Newton, men plunged worriedly into the search for new mythologies and standards to give them bearings. Politically, this led to Fascism, Marxism and the more irrational of the old certainties – extreme nationalism, for example. People did not feel inspired or excited by tolerance, democracy and the old individual freedoms.

Such influences made it all the more difficult to deal with the deepening uncertainty and foreboding clouding international relations in the 1930s. The heart of this lay in Europe, in the German problem, which threatened a greater upheaval than could Japan. Germany had not been destroyed in 1918; it was a logical consequence, therefore, that it would one day again exercise its due weight. Geography, population and industrial power all meant that in one way or another a united Germany must dominate central Europe and overshadow France. What was at issue fundamentally was whether this could be faced without war; only a few cranks thought it might be disposed of by dividing again the Germany united in 1871.

Germans soon began to demand the revision of the settlement of Versailles. This demand eventually became unmanageable, although in the 1920s it was tackled in a hopeful spirit. The real burden of reparations was gradually whittled away and the 1925 Treaty of Locarno was seen as a great landmark because by it Germany gave her consent to the Versailles territorial settlement in the west. But it left open the question of revision in the east and behind this loomed the larger question: how could a country potentially so powerful as Germany relate to its neighbours in a balanced, peaceful way, given the particular historical and cultural experience of the Germans?

Most people hoped this had been settled by the creation of a democratic German republic, whose institutions would gently and benevolently reconstruct German society and civilization. It was true that the constitution of the Weimar Republic (as it was called after the place where its constituent assembly met) was very liberal, but too many Germans were out of sympathy with it from the start. That Weimar had solved the German problem was revealed as an illusion when economic depression shattered the narrow base on which the German republic rested and set loose the destructive nationalist and social forces it had masked.

When this happened, the containment of Germany again became an international problem. But for a number of reasons, the 1930s were a very unpromising decade for containment to be easy. To begin with, some of the worst effects of the world economic crisis were felt in the relatively weak

and agricultural economies of the new states of eastern and central Europe. France had always looked for allies against a German revival there, but such allies were now gravely weakened. Furthermore, their very existence made it doubly difficult to involve the USSR, again an indisputable (if mysterious) great power, in the containment of Germany. Her ideological distinction presented barriers enough to co-operation with the United Kingdom and France, but there was also her strategic remoteness. No Soviet force could reach central Europe without crossing one or more of the east European states, whose short lives were haunted by fear of the USSR and Communism: Romania, Poland and the Baltic states, after all, were built from, among other things, former Russian lands.

Nor were the Americans of any help. The whole trend of American policy since President Wilson failed to get his countrymen to join the League of Nations had been back towards a self-absorbed isolation which was, of course, suited to traditional ideas. Americans who had gone to Europe as soldiers did not want to repeat the experience. Justified apparently by boom in the 1920s, isolation was paradoxically confirmed by slump in the 1930s. When Americans did not confusedly blame Europe for their troubles – the question of debts from the war years had great psychological impact because it was believed to be tied up with international financial problems (as indeed it was, though not quite as Americans thought) – they felt distrustful of further entanglement. Anyway, the depression left them with enough on their plate. With the election of a Democratic president in 1932 they were, in fact, at the beginning of an era of important change which would in the end sweep away this mood, but this could not be foreseen.

The next phase of American history was to be presided over by Democrats for five successive presidential terms, the first four of them after elections won by the same man, Franklin Roosevelt. To stand four successive times as presidential candidate was almost unprecedented (only the unsuccessful socialist, Eugene Debs, also did so); to win was astonishing. To do so with (on each occasion) an absolute majority of the popular vote was something like a revolution. No earlier Democratic candidate since the civil war had ever had one at all (and no other was to have one until 1964). Moreover, Roosevelt was a rich, patrician figure. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that he should have emerged as one of the greatest leaders of the early twentieth century. He did so in an electoral contest which was basically one of hope versus despair. He offered confidence and the promise of action to shake off the blight of economic depression. A political transformation followed his victory, the building of a Democratic hegemony on a coalition of neglected constituencies – the south, the poor, the farmer, the

Negro, the progressive liberal intellectual – which then attracted further support as it seemed to deliver results.

There was some degree of illusion in this. The ‘New Deal’ on which the Roosevelt administration embarked was still not grappling satisfactorily with the economy by 1939. None the less it changed the emphasis of the working of American capitalism and its relations with government. A huge programme of unemployment relief with insurance was started, millions were poured into public works, new regulation of finance was introduced, and a great experiment in public ownership was launched in a hydroelectric scheme in the Tennessee valley. Capitalism was given a new lease of life, and a new governmental setting. The New Deal brought the most important extension of the power of the Federal authorities over American society and the states that had ever occurred in peacetime and it has proved irreversible. Thus American politics reflected the same pressures towards collectivism which affected other countries in the twentieth century. In this sense, too, the Roosevelt era was historically decisive. It changed the course of American constitutional and political history as nothing had done since the civil war and incidentally offered to the world a democratic alternative to Fascism and Communism by providing a liberal version of large-scale governmental intervention in the economy. This achievement is all the more impressive in that it rested almost entirely on the interested choices of politicians committed to the democratic process and not on the arguments of economists, some of whom were already advocating greater central management of the economy in capitalist nations. It was a remarkable demonstration of the ability of the American political system to deliver what people felt they wanted.

The same machinery, of course, could also only deliver as a foreign policy what most Americans would tolerate. Roosevelt was much more aware than the majority of his fellow citizens of the dangers of persistent American isolation from Europe’s problems. But he could reveal his own views only slowly.

With the USSR and the United States unavailable, only the western European great powers remained to confront Germany if she revived. Great Britain and France were badly placed to act as the policemen of Europe. They had memories of their difficulties in dealing with Germany even when Russia had been at their side. Furthermore, they had been much at odds with one another since 1918. They were also militarily weak. France, conscious of her inferiority in manpower should Germany ever rearm, had invested in a programme of strategic defence by fortification, which looked impressive but effectively deprived her of the power to act offensively. The Royal Navy was no longer without a rival, nor, as in 1914, safe in

concentrating its resources in European waters. British governments long pursued a reduction of expenditure on armaments at a time when world-wide commitments were a growing strain on her forces. Economic depression reinforced this tendency; it was feared that the costs of rearmament would cripple recovery by causing inflation. Many British voters, too, believed that Germany's grievances were just. They were disposed to make concessions in the name of German nationalism and self-determination, even by handing back German colonies. Both Great Britain and France were also troubled by a joker in the European pack, Italy. Under Mussolini, hopes that she might be enlisted against Germany had disappeared by 1938.

This arose from a belated attempt by Italy to participate in the scramble for Africa when, in 1935, her forces invaded Ethiopia. Such action posed the question of what should be done by the League of Nations; it was clearly a breach of its covenant that one of its members should attack another. France and Great Britain were in an awkward position. As great powers, Mediterranean powers and African colonial powers, they were bound to take the lead against Italy at the League. But they did so feebly and half-heartedly, for they did not want to alienate an Italy they would like to have with them against Germany. The result was the worst possible one. The League failed to check aggression and Italy was alienated. Ethiopia lost its independence, though, it later proved, only for six years.

This was one of several moments at which it later looked as if a fatal error was committed. But it is impossible to say in retrospect at what stage the situation which developed from these facts became unmanageable. Certainly the emergence of a much more radical and ferociously opportunist regime in Germany was the major turning point. But the depression had preceded this and made it possible. Economic collapse also had another important effect. It made plausible an ideological interpretation of events in the 1930s and thus further embittered them. Because of the intensification of class conflict which economic collapse brought with it, interested politicians sometimes interpreted the development of international relations in terms of Fascism versus Communism, and even of Right versus Left or Democracy versus Dictatorship. This was easier after Mussolini, angered by British and French reactions to his invasion of Ethiopia, came to ally Italy to Germany and talked of an anti-Communist crusade. But this was misleading, too. All ideological interpretations of international affairs in the 1930s tended to obscure the central nature of the German problem – and, therefore, to make it harder to tackle.

Soviet propaganda was important, too. During the 1930s her internal situation was precarious. The industrialization programme was imposing grave strains and sacrifices. These were mastered – though perhaps also

exaggerated – by a savage intensification of dictatorship, which expressed itself not only in the collectivization struggle against the peasants but in the turning of terror against the cadres of the regime itself from 1934 onwards. In five years millions of Soviets were executed, imprisoned or exiled, often to forced labour camps. The world looked on amazed as batches of defendants grovelled with grotesque ‘confessions’ before Soviet courts. Nine out of ten generals in the army went and, it has been estimated, half the officer corps. A new Communist élite replaced the old one in these years; by 1939 over half the delegates who had attended the Party Congress of 1934 had been arrested. It was very difficult for outsiders to be sure what was happening, but it was clear to them that the USSR was by no means either a civilized, liberal state or necessarily a very strong potential ally.

More directly, this affected the international situation because of the propaganda which accompanied it. Much of this, no doubt, arose from the deliberate provocation inside the USSR of a siege mentality; far from being relaxed, the habit of thinking of the world in terms of Us versus Them, which had been born in Marxist dogma and the interventions of 1918–22, was encouraged in the 1930s. As this notion took hold, so, outside, did the preaching of the doctrine of international class struggle by the Comintern. The reciprocal effect was predictable. The fears of conservatives everywhere were intensified. It became easy to think of any concession to left-wing or even mildly progressive forces as a victory for the Bolsheviks. As attitudes thus hardened on the Right, so Communists were given new evidence for the thesis of inevitable class conflict and revolution.

But there was not one successful left-wing revolution. The revolutionary danger had subsided rapidly after the immediate post-war years. Labour governments peacefully and undramatically ruled Great Britain for part of the 1920s. The second ended in financial collapse in 1931, to be replaced by Conservative coalitions which had overwhelming electoral support and proceeded to govern with remarkable fidelity to the tradition of progressive and piecemeal social and administrative reform which had marked Great Britain’s advance into the ‘Welfare State’. This direction had been followed even further in the Scandinavian countries, often held up for admiration for their combination of political democracy and practical socialism, and as a contrast to Communism. Even in France, where there was a large and active Communist Party, there was no sign that its aims were acceptable to the majority of the electorate even after the Depression. In Germany, the Communist Party before 1933 had been able to get more votes, but it was never able to displace the Social Democrats in control of the working-class movement. In less advanced countries than these, Communism’s revolutionary success was even smaller. In Spain it had to compete with socialists

and anarchists; Spanish conservatives certainly feared it and may have had grounds to fear also what they felt to be a slide towards social revolution under the republic which was established in 1931, but it was hardly Spanish Communism that threatened them.

Yet ideological interpretations had great appeal, even to many who were not Communists. It was much strengthened by the accession to power of a new ruler in Germany, Adolf Hitler, whose success makes it very difficult to deny him political genius despite his pursuit of goals which make it difficult to believe him wholly sane. In the early 1920s he was only a disappointed agitator, who had failed in an attempt to overthrow a government (the Bavarian), and who poured out his obsessive nationalism and anti-Semitism not only in hypnotically effective speeches but in a long, shapeless, semi-autobiographical book which few people read. In 1933, the National Socialist German Workers Party which he led ('Nazi' for short) was electorally strong enough for him to be appointed Chancellor of the German republic. Politically, this may have been the most momentous single decision of the century, for it meant the revolutionizing of Germany, its redirection upon a course of aggression which ended by destroying the old Europe and Germany too, and that meant a new world.

Though Hitler's messages were simple, his appeal was complex. He preached that Germany's troubles had identifiable sources. The Treaty of Versailles was one. The international capitalists were another. The supposedly anti-national activities of German Marxists and Jews were others. He also said that the righting of Germany's political wrongs must be combined with the renovation of German society and culture, and that this was a matter of purifying the biological stock of the German people by excising its non-Aryan components.

In 1922 such a message took Hitler a very little way; in 1930 it won him 107 seats in the German parliament – more than the Communists, who had 77. The Nazis were already the beneficiaries of economic collapse, and it was to get worse. There are several reasons why the Nazis reaped its political harvest, but one of the most important was that the Communists spent as much energy fighting the socialists as their other opponents. This had fatally handicapped the Left in Germany all through the 1920s. Another reason was that under the democratic republic anti-Semitic feeling had grown. It, too, was exacerbated by economic collapse. Anti-Semitism, like nationalism, had an appeal which cut across classes as an explanation of Germany's troubles, unlike the equally simple Marxist explanation in terms of class war which, naturally, antagonized some as well as (it was hoped) attracting others.

By 1930 the Nazis showed they were a power in the land. They attracted

more support, and won backers from those who saw in their street-fighting gangs an anti-Communist insurance, from nationalists who sought rearmament and revision of the Versailles peace settlement, and from conservative politicians who thought that Hitler was a party leader like any other who might now be valuable in their own game. The manoeuvres were complicated, but in 1932 the Nazis became the biggest party in the German parliament, though without a majority of seats. In January 1933 Hitler was called to office in due constitutional form by the president of the republic. There followed new elections, in which the regime's monopoly of the radio and use of intimidation still did not secure the Nazis a majority of seats; none the less, they had one when supported by some right-wing members of parliament who joined them to vote special enabling powers to the government. The most important was that of governing by emergency decree. This was the end of parliament and parliamentary sovereignty. Armed with these powers, the Nazis proceeded to carry out a revolutionary destruction of democratic institutions. By 1939, there was virtually no sector of German society not controlled or intimidated by them. The conservatives, too, had lost. They soon found that Nazi interference with the independence of traditional authorities was likely to go very far.

Like Stalin's Soviet Union, the Nazi regime rested in large measure on terror used mercilessly against its enemies. It was soon unleashed against the Jews and an astonished Europe found itself witnessing revivals in one of its most advanced societies of the pogroms of medieval Europe or tsarist Russia. This was indeed so amazing that many people outside Germany found it difficult to believe that it was happening. Confusion over the nature of the regime made it even more difficult to deal with. Some saw Hitler simply as a nationalist leader bent, like an Atatürk, upon the regeneration of his country and the assertion of its rightful claims. Others saw him as a crusader against Bolshevism. Even when people only thought he might be a useful barrier against it, that increased the likelihood that men of the Left would see him as a tool of capitalism. But no simple formula will contain Hitler or his aims – and there is still great disagreement about what these were – and probably a reasonable approximation to the truth is simply to recognize that he expressed the resentments and exasperations of German society in their most negative and destructive forms and embodied them to a monstrous degree. When his personality was given scope by economic disaster, political cynicism and a favourable arrangement of international forces, he could release these negative qualities at the expense of all Europeans in the long run, his own countrymen included.

The path by which Germany came to be at war again in 1939 is complicated. Argument is still possible about when, if ever, there was a chance of

avoiding the final outcome. One important moment, clearly, was when Mussolini, formerly wary of German ambitions in central Europe, became Hitler's ally. After he had been alienated by British and French policy over his Ethiopian adventure, a civil war broke out in Spain when a group of generals mutinied against the left-wing republic. Hitler and Mussolini both sent contingents to support the man who emerged there as the rebel leader, General Franco. This, more than any other single fact, gave an ideological colour to Europe's divisions. Hitler, Mussolini and Franco were all now identified as 'Fascist' and Soviet foreign policy began to co-ordinate support for Spain within western countries by letting local Communists abandon their attacks on other left-wing parties and encourage 'Popular Fronts'. Thus Spain came to be seen as a conflict between Right and Left in its purest form; this was a distortion, but it encouraged people to think of Europe as divided into two camps.

British and French governments were by this time well aware of the difficulties of dealing with Germany. Hitler had already in 1935 announced that her rearmament (forbidden at Versailles) had begun. Until their own rearmament was completed, they remained very weak. The first consequence of this was shown to the world when German troops re-entered the 'demilitarized' zone of the Rhineland from which they had been excluded by the Treaty of Versailles. No attempt was made to resist this move. After the civil war in Spain had thrown opinion in Great Britain and France into further disarray, Hitler then seized Austria. The terms of Versailles, which forbade the fusion of Germany and Austria, seemed hard to uphold; to the French and British electorates this could be presented as a matter of legitimately aggrieved nationalism. The Austrian republic had also long had internal troubles. The *Anschluss* (as union with Germany was called) took place in March 1938. In the autumn came the next German aggression, the seizure of part of Czechoslovakia. Again, this was justified by the specious claims of self-determination; the areas involved were so important that their loss crippled the prospect of future Czechoslovak self-defence, but they were areas with many German inhabitants. Memel would follow, on the same grounds, the next year. Hitler was gradually fulfilling the old dream which had been lost when Prussia beat Austria – the dream of a united Great Germany, defined as all lands of those of German blood.

The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia had been something of a turning-point. It was achieved by a series of agreements at Munich in September 1938 in which Great Britain and Germany were the main players. This was the last great initiative of British foreign policy to try to satisfy Hitler. The British prime minister was still too unsure of rearmament to resist, but hoped also that the transference of the last substantial group of

Germans from alien rule to that of their homeland might deprive Hitler of the motive for further revision of Versailles – a settlement which was now somewhat tattered in any case.

He was wrong; Hitler went on to inaugurate a programme of expansion into Slav lands. The first step was the absorption of what was left of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939. This brought forward the question of the Polish settlement of 1919. Hitler resented the 'Polish Corridor', which separated East Prussia from Germany and contained Danzig, an old German city given an international status in 1919. At this point the British government, though hesitatingly, changed tack and offered a guarantee to Poland, Romania, Greece and Turkey against aggression. It also began a wary negotiation with the USSR.

Soviet policy remains hard to interpret. It seems that Stalin kept the Spanish civil war going with support to the republic as long as it seemed likely to tie up German attention, but then looked for other ways of buying time against the attack from the west which he always feared. To him, it seemed likely that a German attack on the USSR might be encouraged by Great Britain and France, who would see with relief the danger they had so long faced turning against the workers' state. No doubt they would have done. There was little possibility of working with the British or French to oppose Hitler, however, even if they were willing to do so, because no Russian army could reach Germany except through Poland – and this the Poles would never permit. Accordingly, as a Soviet diplomat remarked to a French colleague on hearing of the Munich decisions, there was now nothing for it but a fourth partition of Poland. This was arranged in the summer of 1939. After their bitter respective diatribes against Bolshevik–Slav barbarism and Fascist–capitalist exploitation, Germany and the Soviets made an agreement in August which provided for the division of Poland between them; authoritarian states enjoy great flexibility in the conduct of diplomacy. Armed with this, Hitler went on to attack Poland. He thus began the Second World War on 1 September 1939. Two days later the British and French honoured their guarantee to Poland and declared war on Germany.

Their governments were not very keen on doing so, for it was obvious that they could not help Poland. That unhappy nation disappeared once more, divided by Soviet and German forces about a month after the outbreak of war. But not to have intervened would have meant acquiescing in the German domination of Europe, for no other nation would then have thought British or French support worth having. So, uneasily and without the excitement of 1914, the only two constitutional great powers of Europe found themselves facing a totalitarian regime. Neither their peoples nor governments had much enthusiasm for this role, and the decline of liberal

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and democratic forces since 1918 put them in a position much inferior to that of the Allies of 1914, but exasperation with Hitler's long series of aggressions and broken promises made it hard to see what sort of peace could be made which would reassure them. The basic cause of the war was, as in 1914, German nationalism. But whereas then Germany had gone to war because it felt threatened, now Great Britain and France were responding to the danger presented by Germany's expansion. They felt threatened this time.

To the surprise of many observers, and the relief of some, the first six months of the war were almost uneventful once the short Polish campaign was over. It was quickly plain that mechanized forces and airpower were to play a much more important part than between 1914 and 1918. The memory of the slaughter of the Somme and Verdun was too vivid for the British and French to plan anything but an economic offensive; the weapon of blockade, they hoped, would be effective. Hitler was unwilling to disturb them, because he was anxious to make peace. This deadlock was only broken when the British sought to intensify the blockade in Scandinavian waters. This coincided, remarkably, with a German offensive to secure ore supplies, which conquered Norway and Denmark. Its launching on 9 April 1940 opened an astonishing period of fighting. Only a month later there began a brilliant German invasion, first of the Low Countries and then of

France. A powerful armoured attack through the Ardennes opened the way to the division of the Allied armies and the capture of Paris. On 22 June France signed an armistice with the Germans. By the end of the month, the whole European coast from the Pyrenees to the North Cape was in German hands. Italy had joined in on the German side ten days before the French surrender. A new French government at Vichy broke off relations with Great Britain after the British had seized or destroyed French warships they feared might fall into German hands. The Third Republic effectively came to an end with the installation of a French marshal, a hero of the First World War, as head of state. With no ally left on the continent, Great Britain faced a worse strategic situation by far than that in which she had struggled against Napoleon.

This was a huge change in the nature of the war, but Great Britain was not quite alone. There were the Dominions, all of which had entered the war on her side, and a number of governments in exile from the overrun continent. Some of these commanded forces of their own and Norwegians, Danes, Dutchmen, Belgians, Czechs and Poles were to fight gallantly, often with decisive effect, in the years ahead. The most important exiled contingents were those of the French, but at this stage they represented a faction within France, not its legal government. A general who had left France before the armistice and was condemned to death *in absentia* was their leader: Charles de Gaulle. He was recognized by the British only as 'leader of the Free French' but saw himself as constitutional legate of the Third Republic and the custodian of France's interests and honour. He soon began to show an independence which was in the end to make him the greatest servant of his country since Clemenceau.

De Gaulle was immediately important to the British because of uncertainties about what might happen to parts of the French empire, where he hoped to find sympathizers who wished to join him to continue the fight. This was one way in which the war was now extended geographically. It was also a consequence of Italy's entry into the war, since her African possessions and the Mediterranean sea-lanes now became operational areas. Finally, the availability of Atlantic and Scandinavian ports to the Germans meant that what was later called the 'Battle of the Atlantic', the struggle by submarine, surface and air attack to sever or wear down British sea communications, was now bound to become much fiercer.

Immediately, the British Isles faced direct attack. The hour had already found the man to brace the nation against such a challenge. Winston Churchill, after a long and chequered political career, had become prime minister when the Norwegian campaign collapsed, because no other man commanded support in all parties in the House of Commons. To the coalition

government which he immediately formed he gave vigorous leadership, something hitherto felt to be lacking. More important than this, he called forth in his people, whom he could address by radio, qualities they had forgotten they possessed. It was soon clear that only defeat after direct assault was going to get the British out of the war.

This was even more certain after a great air battle over southern England in August and September 1940 had been won by British science, in the form of radar, and the Royal Air Force. For a moment, Englishmen knew the pride and relief of the Greeks after Marathon. It was true, as Churchill said in a much-quoted speech, that 'never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'. This victory made a German sea-borne invasion impossible (though a successful one was always unlikely). It also established that Great Britain could not be defeated by air bombardment alone. The islands had a bleak outlook ahead, but this victory changed the direction of the war, for it was the beginning of a period in which a variety of influences turned German attention elsewhere. In December 1940 planning began for a German invasion of the Soviet Union.

By that winter, the USSR had made further gains in the west, apparently with an eye to securing a glacis against a future German attack. A war against Finland gave her important strategic areas. The Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were swallowed in 1940. Bessarabia, which Romania had taken from Russia in 1918, was now taken back, together with the northern Bukovina. In the last case, Stalin was going beyond tsarist boundaries. The German decision to attack the USSR arose in part because of disagreements about the future direction of Soviet expansion: Germany sought to keep the USSR away from the Balkans and the Straits. It was also aimed at demonstrating, by a quick overthrow of the Soviet Union, that further British fighting was pointless. But there was also a deep personal element in the decision. Hitler had always sincerely and fanatically detested Bolshevism and maintained that the Slavs, a racially inferior group in his mind, should provide Germans with living space and raw materials in the east. His was a last, perverted vision of the old struggle of the Teuton to impose European civilization on the Slav east. Many Germans responded to such a theme. It was to justify more appalling atrocities than any earlier crusading myth.

In a brief spring campaign, which provided an overture to the coming clash of titans, the Germans overran Yugoslavia and Greece (with the second of which Italian forces had been unhappily engaged since October 1940). Once again British arms were driven from the mainland of Europe. Crete, too, was taken by a spectacular German airborne assault. Now all was ready for 'Barbarossa', as the great onslaught on the USSR was named,

after the medieval emperor who had led the Third Crusade (and had been drowned in the course of it).

The attack was launched on 22 June 1941 and had huge early successes. Vast numbers of prisoners were taken and the Soviet armies fell back hundreds of miles. The German advance guard came within a few miles of entering Moscow. But that margin was not quite eliminated and by Christmas the first successful Red Army counter-attacks had announced that in fact Germany was pinned down. German strategy had lost the initiative. If the British and Soviets could hold on and if they could keep in alliance with one another then, failing a radical technical modification of the war by the discovery of new weapons of great power, their access to American armament production would inexorably increase their strength. This did not, of course, mean that they would inevitably defeat Germany, only that they might bring her to negotiate terms.

The American president had believed since 1940 that in the interests of the United States Great Britain had to be supported up to the limits permitted by his own public and the law of neutrality. In fact, he went well beyond both at times. By the summer of 1941, Hitler knew that to all intents and purposes the United States was an undeclared enemy. A crucial step had been the American Lend-Lease Act of March that year which, after British assets in the United States had been liquidated, provided production and services to the Allies without payment. Soon afterwards, the American government extended naval patrols and the protection of its shipping further eastward into the Atlantic. After the invasion of the USSR came a meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt which resulted in a statement of shared principles – the Atlantic Charter – in which the leaders of one nation at war and another formally at peace spoke together of the needs of a post-war world ‘after the final destruction of the Nazi tyranny’. This was a long way from isolationism and was the background to Hitler’s second fateful but foolish decision of 1941, a declaration of war on the United States on 11 December, after a Japanese attack on British and American territories four days earlier. Hitler had earlier promised the Japanese to do this. The war thus became global. The British and American declarations of war on Japan might have left two separate wars to rage, with only Great Britain engaged in both; Hitler’s action threw away the chance that American power might have been kept out of Europe and deployed only in the Pacific. Few single acts have so marked the end of an epoch, for this announced the eclipse of European affairs. Europe’s future would now be settled not by her own efforts but by the two great powers on her flanks, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Japanese decision was also a rash one, though the logic of Japanese

policy had long pointed towards conflict with the United States. Japan's ties with Germany and Italy, though they had some propaganda value for both sides, did not amount to much in practice. What mattered in the timing of Japanese policy was the resolution of debates in Tokyo about the danger, or lack of it, of a challenge to the United States which must involve war. The crux of the matter was that Japan's needs for a successful conclusion of the war in China included oil, which she could only obtain with the tacit consent of the United States that Japan was to destroy China. This no American government could have given. Instead, in October 1941 the American government imposed an embargo on all trade by United States citizens with Japan.

There followed the last stages of a process which had its origins in the ascendancy established in Japan by reactionary and militant forces in the 1930s. The question had by this time become for the Japanese military planners purely strategic and technical; since they would have to take the resources in South-East Asia which they needed by force, all that had to be settled was the nature of the war against the United States and its timing. Such a decision was fundamentally irrational, for the chances of ultimate success were very small; once arguments of national honour had won, though, the final calculations about the best point and moment of attack were carefully made. The choice was made to strike as hard a blow as possible against American sea-power at the outset in order to gain the maximum freedom of movement in the Pacific and South China Sea. The result was the onslaught of 7 December, whose centrepiece was an air attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor which was one of the most brilliantly conceived and executed operations in the history of warfare. Yet it fell just short of complete success, for it did not destroy American naval air power, though it gave the Japanese for months the strategical freedom they sought. After their victory at Pearl Harbor the Japanese faced a prolonged war they were bound to lose in the end. They had united Americans. Isolationism could be virtually ignored after 8 December; Roosevelt had a nation behind him as Woodrow Wilson never had.

When a few Japanese bombs had even fallen on the American mainland, it was obvious that this was much more truly a world war than the 1914-18 conflict had been. The German operations in the Balkans had by the time of Pearl Harbor left continental Europe with only four neutral countries: Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland. The war in North Africa raged back and forth between Libya and Egypt. It was extended to Syria by the arrival there of a German mission, and to Iraq when a nationalist government supported by German aircraft was removed by a British force. Iran had been occupied by British and Soviet forces in 1941. In Africa, Ethiopia was liberated and the Italian colonial empire destroyed.

With the opening of the East Asian war the Japanese wrought destruction on the colonial empires there, too. Within a few months they took Indonesia, Indochina, Malaya and the Philippines. They pressed through Burma towards the Indian border and were soon bombing the north Australian port of Darwin from New Guinea. Meanwhile, the naval war was fought by German submarine forces, aircraft and surface raiders all over the Atlantic, Arctic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. Only a tiny minority of countries was left outside this struggle. Its demands were colossal and carried much further the mobilization of whole societies than had the First World War. The role of the United States was decisive. Her huge manufacturing power made the material preponderance of the 'United Nations' (as the coalition of states fighting the Germans, the Italians and Japanese was called from the beginning of 1942) incontestable.

None the less, the way ahead was still a hard one. The first half of 1942 was a very bleak time for the United Nations. Then came the turning-point, in four great and very different battles. In June, a Japanese fleet attacking Midway Island was broken in a battle fought largely by aircraft. Japanese losses in carriers and aircrews were such that she never regained the strategic initiative and the long American counter-attack in the Pacific now began to unroll. Then, at the beginning of November, the British army in Egypt decisively defeated the Germans and Italians and began a march west which was to end with the eviction of the enemy from all North Africa. The battle of El Alamein had coincided with landings by Anglo-American forces in French North Africa. They subsequently moved eastwards and by May 1943 German and Italian resistance on the continent had ceased. Six months earlier, at the end of 1942, the Soviets had bottled up at Stalingrad on the Volga a German army rashly exposed by Hitler. The remnants surrendered in February in the most demoralizing defeat yet suffered by the Germans in Russia, and yet one which was only part of three splendid months of winter advance which marked the turning-point of the war on the eastern front.

The other great Allied victory has no specific date, but was as important as any of these. This was the Battle of the Atlantic. Allied merchant-shipping losses reached their peak in 1942. At the end of the year nearly 8 million tons of shipping had been lost for 87 U-boats sunk. In 1943 the figures were 3¼ million tons and 237 U-boats, and during the spring months the battle had been won. In May alone, forty-seven U-boats had been sunk. This was the most crucial battle of all for the United Nations, for on it depended their ability to draw on American production.

Command of the sea also made possible re-entry to Europe. Roosevelt had agreed to give priority to the defeat of Germany, but the mounting of

an invasion of France to take the strain off the Soviet armies could not in the end be managed before 1944, and this angered Stalin. When it came, the Anglo-American invasion of northern France in June 1944 was the greatest seaborne expedition in history. Mussolini had by then been overthrown by his fellow Italians and Italy had already been invaded from the south; now Germany was fighting on three fronts. Soon after the landings in Normandy, the Soviets entered Poland. Going faster than their allies, it still took them until the following April to reach Berlin. In the west, Allied forces had by then broken out of Italy into central Europe and from the Low Countries into northern Germany. Almost incidentally, terrible destruction had been inflicted on German cities by a great air offensive which, until the last few months of the war, exercised no decisive strategic effect. When, on 30 April, the man who had ignited this conflagration killed himself in a bunker in the ruins of Berlin, historic Europe was literally as well as figuratively in ruins.

The war in the East took a little longer. At the beginning of August 1945 the Japanese government knew it must be defeated. Many of Japan's former conquests had been retrieved, her cities were devastated by American bombing, and her sea-power, on which communications and safety from invasion rested, was in ruins. At this moment two nuclear weapons of a destructive power hitherto unapproached were dropped with terrible effect on two Japanese cities by the Americans. Between the explosions, the Soviets declared war on Japan. On 2 September the Japanese government abandoned its plan of a suicidal last-ditch stand and signed an instrument of surrender. The Second World War had come to an end.

In its immediate aftermath it was difficult to measure the colossal extent of what had happened. Only one clear and unambiguous good was at once visible, the overthrow of the Nazi regime. As the Allied armies advanced into Europe, the deepest evils of a system of terror and torture were revealed by the opening of the huge prison camps and the revelations of what went on in them. It was suddenly apparent that Churchill had spoken no more than the bare truth when he told his countrymen that 'if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.'

The reality of this threat could first be seen in Belsen and Buchenwald. Distinctions could hardly be meaningful between degrees of atrocity inflicted on political prisoners, slave labourers from other countries, or some prisoners of war. But the world's imagination was most struck by the belated recognition of the systematic attempt which had been made to wipe out European Jewry, the so-called 'Final Solution' sought by Germans, an

attempt which was carried far enough to change the demographic map: the Polish Jews were almost obliterated, and Dutch Jews, too, suffered terribly in proportion to their numbers. Overall, though complete figures may never be available, it is probable that between 5 and 6 million Jews were killed, whether in the gas-chambers and crematoria of the extermination camps, by shootings and extermination on the spot in east and south-east Europe, or by overwork and hunger.

Few people and no nations had engaged in the war because they saw it as a struggle against such wickedness. It cannot be doubted, though, that many of them were heartened as it proceeded by the sense that the conflict had a moral dimension. Propaganda contributed to this. Even while Great Britain was the only nation in Europe still on her feet and fighting for her survival, a democratic society had sought to see in the struggle positive ends which went beyond survival and beyond the destruction of Nazism. Aspirations to a new world of co-operation between great powers and social and economic reconstruction were embodied in the Atlantic Charter and United Nations. They were encouraged by sentimental goodwill towards allies and a tragic blurring of differences of interest and social ideals which were only too quickly to re-emerge. Much wartime rhetoric boomeranged badly with the coming of peace; disillusionment followed inspection of the world after the guns were silent. Yet for all this, the war of 1939-45 in Europe remains a moral struggle in a way, perhaps, in which no other war between great powers has ever been. It is important to remember this. Too much was to be heard of the regrettable consequences of Allied victory, and it is too easily forgotten that it crushed the worst challenge to liberal civilization that has ever arisen.

Some far-sighted men could see a deep irony in this. In many ways, Germany had been one of the most progressive countries in Europe; the embodiment of much that was best in its civilization. That Germany should fall prey to collective derangement on this scale suggested that something had been wrong at the root of that civilization itself. The crimes of Nazism had been carried out not in a fit of barbaric intoxication with conquest, but in a systematic, scientific, controlled, bureaucratic (though often inefficient) way, about which there was little that was irrational except the appalling end which it sought. In this respect the Asian war was importantly different. Japanese imperialism replaced the old European imperialisms for a time, but many among the subject peoples did not much regret the change. Propaganda during the war attempted to give currency to the notion of a 'Fascist' Japan, but this was a distortion of so traditional a society's character. No such appalling consequences as faced European nations under German rule would have followed from a Japanese victory.

The second obvious result of the war was its unparalleled destructiveness. It was most visible in the devastated cities of Germany and Japan, where mass aerial bombing, one of the major innovations of the Second World War, proved much more costly to life and buildings than had been the bombing of Spanish cities in the Spanish civil war. Yet even those early essays had been enough to convince many observers that bombing alone could bring a country to its knees. In fact, although often invaluable in combination with other forms of fighting, the huge strategic bombing offensive against Germany, built up by the British Royal Air Force from tiny beginnings in 1940, and steadily supplemented by the United States Air Force from 1942 onwards, up to the point at which their combined forces could provide a target with continuous day and night bombing, achieved very little until the last few months of the war. Nor was the fiery destruction of the Japanese cities strategically so important as the elimination of its sea-power.

Not only cities had been shattered. The economic life and communications of central Europe had also been grievously stricken. In 1945, millions of refugees were wandering about in it, trying to get home. There was a grave danger of famine and epidemic because of the difficulty of supplying food. The tremendous problems of 1918 were upon Europe again, and this time they confronted nations demoralized by defeat and occupation; only the neutrals and Great Britain had escaped those scourges. There were abundant arms in private hands, and some feared revolution. These conditions could also be found in Asia, but there the physical destruction was less severe and prospects of recovery better.

In Europe, too, the revolutionary political impact of the war was obvious. The power structure, which had been a reality until 1914 and had an illusory prolongation of life between the two world wars, was doomed in 1941. Two great peripheral powers dominated Europe politically and were established militarily in its heart. This was evident at a meeting of the Allied leaders at Yalta in February 1945 at which Roosevelt secretly agreed with Stalin on the terms on which the USSR would enter the war against Japan. Yalta also provided a basis for agreement between all three great powers which was to be the nearest thing to a formal peace settlement for Europe achieved for decades. Its outcome was that old central Europe would disappear. Europe would be divided into eastern and western halves. Once again a Trieste-Baltic line became a reality, but now new differences were to be layered on top of old. At the end of 1945 there lay to the east a Europe of states which, with the exception of Greece, all had Communist governments or governments in which Communists shared power with

others. The Soviet army, which had overrun them, had proved itself a far better instrument for the extension of international Communism than revolution had ever been. The pre-war Baltic republics did not emerge from the Soviet state, of course, and the Soviet Union now also absorbed parts of pre-war Poland and Romania.

Germany, the centre of the old European power structure, had effectively ceased to exist. A phase of European history which she had dominated was at an end, and Bismarck's creation was partitioned into zones occupied by the Russians, Americans, British and French. The other major political units of western Europe had reconstituted themselves after occupation and defeat, but were feeble; Italy, which had changed sides after Mussolini had been overthrown, had, like France, a much strengthened and enlarged Communist Party which, it could not be forgotten, was still committed to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Only Great Britain retained its stature of 1939 in the world's eyes; it was even briefly enhanced by its stand in 1940 and 1941, and remained for a while the recognized equal of the USSR and the United States. (Formally, this was true of France and China, too, but less attention was paid to them.) Yet Great Britain's moment was past. By a huge effort of mobilizing its resources and social life to a degree unequalled outside Stalin's Soviet Union, the country had been able to retain its standing. But it had been let out of a strategic impasse only by the German attack on the USSR, and kept afloat only by American Lend-Lease. And this aid had not been without its costs: the Americans had insisted on the sale of British overseas assets to meet the bills before it was forthcoming. Moreover, the sterling area was dislocated. American capital was now to move into the old Dominions on a large scale. Those countries had learnt lessons both from their new wartime strength and, paradoxically, from their weakness in so far as they had relied upon the mother country for their defence. From 1945, they more and more acted with full as well as formal independence.

It only took a few years for this huge change in the position of the greatest of the old imperial powers to become clear. Symbolically, when Great Britain made its last great military effort in Europe, in 1944, the expedition was commanded by an American general. Though British forces in Europe for a few months afterwards matched the Americans, they were by the end of the war outnumbered. In Asia, too, although the British reconquered Burma, the defeat of Japan was the work of American naval and air power. For all Churchill's efforts, Roosevelt was by the end of the war negotiating over his head with Stalin, proposing *inter alia* the dismantling of the British empire. Great Britain, in spite of its victorious stand alone in 1940 and the

moral prestige this gave, had not escaped the shattering impact of the war on Europe's political structure. Indeed, it was in some ways the power which, with Germany, illustrated it best.

Thus was registered in Europe the passing of the European supremacy also evident at its periphery. In the last and only briefly successful attempt by a British government to thwart American policy, British forces secured Dutch and French territories in Asia just in time to hand them back to their former overlords and prevent the seizure of power by anti-colonial regimes. But fighting with rebels began almost immediately and it was clear that the imperial powers faced a difficult future. The war had brought revolution to the empires, too. Subtly and suddenly, the kaleidoscope of authority had shifted, and it was still shifting as the war came to an end. The year 1945 is not, therefore, a good place at which to pause; reality was then still masked somewhat by appearance. Many Europeans still had to discover, painfully, that the European age of empire was over.