

The Shadows of Total War

EUROPE, EAST ASIA, AND THE UNITED STATES,
1919–1939

Edited by

ROGER CHICKERING

Georgetown University

STIG FÖRSTER

University of Bern, Switzerland

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

Washington, D.C.

and



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*The Politics of War and Peace
in the 1920s and 1930s*

GERHARD L. WEINBERG

Two factors must be kept in mind at all times when the 1920s and 1930s are under review: the dominating memory of the “Great War” – as what we call World War I had come to be called – and the reality of continued conflict in some portions of the world. In Europe, where most of the fighting had taken place, there was hardly a family without a member who had been killed or wounded in the recent conflict; those individuals were now either conspicuously missing from the family circle or were carrying the physical scars of the fighting. And the family members who had been at the front and survived were generally careful to keep their most awful experiences to themselves; what was the point of upsetting loved ones with accounts of terrors they could neither understand nor alter? The general nature of the fighting and its horrors for participants were well enough known and needed no reciting.

No one anywhere needed to be told that it had all been terrible. Photography was sufficiently advanced by this time to enable anyone interested to obtain some appreciation of the devastation – if they had not seen it in person. Furthermore, certain new developments in the conduct of warfare had aroused horror at the time, and these continued to haunt the memory of the past and reinforce fears for the future. The introduction of poison gas and of the bombing from the air of towns far distant from the actual fighting, both originally German contributions to warfare, were feared as signs of ever more horrible features of fighting if it ever took place again.

The armistice of November 1918, however much commemorated, had not, however, brought peace to all portions of the globe. Civil war and attendant upheavals characterized the situation in Russia, China, and Ireland. People who were not directly affected by these conflicts could certainly hear about them on the radio, read about them in the newspapers, or,

perhaps most frequently, see images in the newsreels that now increasingly accompanied feature films in the movie theaters.

Adding to the dangers people saw about them were aspects of a whole host of new countries that had emerged in Europe in the immediate aftermath of the war. Most of them were internally unstable and simultaneously often dissatisfied about their new borders; obviously they would need years to develop even moderately stable forms. Outside Europe, the colonial empires had begun to dissolve. The emergence of the British dominions as independent actors on the international scene was the politically most obvious harbinger of a world far different from the European-dominated globe before 1914. And if people took the trouble to think back to the fighting on the western front, they would come to realize that both Britain and France had been obliged to draw on their respective colonial empires for soldiers to fight in Europe as opposed to the prior pattern of sending some of their own soldiers from the home country to defend colonial possessions and perhaps add to them.

Although often ignored, it can be argued that the most fateful development of the immediate postwar years in terms of its impact on the maintenance of the peace that had just been constructed was the refusal of two of its major authors to abide by the very provisions they had themselves insisted on including in it. The United States and Great Britain had pressured the French delegation at the peace conference into accepting guarantee treaties in place of a separation of the German territory on the left bank of the Rhine from Germany as a shield against any possible future German aggression. Having received this concession from the French, they had quickly gone back on their part of the bargain: the United States had refused to ratify such a guarantee treaty, and the British had utilized the American refusal to justify a similar procedure of their own. An exhausted France was thus left alone to uphold a settlement that did not include the safety provision the French delegation had thought essential; that under these circumstances French governments shifted uneasily between complaisance and defiance in subsequent years should hardly have surprised – as it did – those countries that were responsible for creating the situation in the first place.

There is an aspect of the interrelationship of the development of total war and the endless and agitated interwar discussion of the so-called war guilt issue that requires our attention. Precisely because no one could conceive of the possibility that anyone in any country had actually wanted what had happened to take place, there was both furious debate about who was responsible for causing the war and an increasing tendency toward the concept that no one had wanted it. Many came to argue, and some came to believe,

that nations had slithered into it the way an individual might slip on a wet pavement and fall into the gutter.¹ The converse of this thought was that if sufficient care were taken, such an accident caused by miscalculation or misunderstanding could be prevented in the future.

In this connection, the letter sent by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to German Chancellor Adolf Hitler as soon as he heard of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939, is worth quoting:

It has been alleged that, if His Majesty's Government had made their position more clear in 1914, the great catastrophe would have been avoided. Whether or not there is any force in that allegation, His Majesty's Government are resolved that on this occasion there shall be no such tragic misunderstanding.

If the case should arise, they are resolved, and prepared, to employ without delay all the forces at their command, and it is impossible to foresee the end of hostilities once engaged. It would be a dangerous illusion to think that, if war once starts, it will come to an early end even if a success on any one of the several fronts on which it will be engaged should have been secured.²

Chamberlain thus tried to make sure that the Germans miscalculate neither the effect of an attack on Poland nor a quick victory on that front.

Although the memory of the war made it inconceivable to most that anyone could possibly deliberately start another one, it must be noted that during the 1920s there was a substantial inclination to move into precisely that direction in two countries: Italy and Japan. In both there were elements arguing for a continuation of pre-1914 expansionist policies; in both cases the pursuit of traditional imperialist objectives looked attractive to some. Since whatever could be grabbed from Germany and Austria-Hungary had already been taken, this would mean a reversal of fronts: from now on one could end the independence of the few states left so in Africa and Southeast Asia, namely Abyssinia and Siam, as Ethiopia and Thailand were then called; try to impose one's power on other independent countries, namely those of Southeast Europe and China; or attempt to steal the colonial possessions of one's allies in the preceding war.

In the case of both countries, the new wars into which they threw themselves, that against Abyssinia by Italy and that against China by Japan, should be seen and can only be understood as continuations of pre-1914

1 For a study quite explicitly directed against this thesis, see Fritz Fischer, *Juli 1914: Wir sind nicht hineingeschlittert; das Staatsgeheimnis um die Riezler-Tagebücher, eine Streitschrift* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1983). For a recent survey of the relevant literature, see John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918-1990* (New York, 1991).

2 Chamberlain to Hitler, Aug. 22, 1939, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, 3d ser., vol. 7 (London, 1954), no. 145. It is most likely that Chamberlain's reference to a continuation of hostilities, even if Germany quickly defeated Poland, had a major impact on the refusal of Italy to join Germany in 1939.

expansionist policies, but in both cases with the utilization of at least some of the new weapons developed in large part during the war. Both Japan and Italy relied heavily on terrorizing enemy populations by attacks from the air, both employed poison gas, and Japan killed thousands of Chinese and other victims in the process of developing a variety of bacteriological weapons. It is of great importance for an understanding of the inability of the two countries to work effectively with Germany in World War II that neither ever understood that they had not only reversed alliances but had now allied themselves with a state that had fundamentally different objectives and was fighting a basically new kind of war.

In the 1920s the government of Germany for most of the time perceived diplomacy as a continuation of war by other means. Determined to reverse the verdict of 1918, the emphasis was on the dissolution of the system created by the treaties of 1919 and the restoration of Germany to its prewar status. Practically no one in leadership positions in the country recognized that the peace settlement had left Germany in a relatively stronger position than the one that it had occupied before the war.³ Neither the acceptance into the League of Nations with a permanent seat on the Council – a position Germany has not secured more than fifty years after World War II – nor the early end of military inspection and of military occupation were ever understood for what they actually represented. Defeat in war had come in a manner few inside the country could accept, and defeat, a despised and misunderstood peace treaty, and the mess inherited by the inexperienced leaders of the new republic were all blamed on the latter rather than on those responsible for the war, the defeat, and the constitutional system that had barred political parties and their leaders from the experience and responsibilities of power. In the competition for leadership in Germany among those who hoped to go beyond any signs of acceptance of the postwar situation to an entirely new position for Germany, the advocate of the most extreme line was called to lead the country in 1933.

Adolf Hitler had seen directly and personally what war was actually like, especially for those who participated at the front in combat themselves. It was in this context that he derided those of his rivals for power who wanted to return to the borders of 1914, a return that would be possible only if Germany went to war for them. Here was a clear sign of their utter stupidity: they were prepared to conduct wars for aims that, given the cost of modern wars in lives, were guaranteed to be hopelessly inadequate since they would merely return Germany to the situation of 1914 when she had been unable to feed her population from her own soil. Referring to them as mere

3 See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II* (New York, 1995), chap. 1.

Grenzpolitiker, border politicians, he designated himself as a *Raumpolitiker*, a politician of space. He would conquer vast spaces for German settlement; these in turn would enable Germans to raise children and control resources for further conquests, until Germany conquered the globe and that globe was inhabited or controlled exclusively by Germans. Only for *such* wars could the sacrifices modern war required be justified; and he assured his listeners in the 1920s that he would be willing to lead them to shed their blood in that type of conflict.⁴

It is not possible to understand what happened after 1933 unless one considers the Nazi revolution as a racial or demographic revolution with worldwide aims from its very beginnings and pays close attention to its aims even when these were not reached. A revolution halted in its tracks cannot be comprehended without attention to where those tracks were supposed to go in the eyes of those in charge: individuals who not surprisingly expected success, not failure, in their efforts, and who attuned their policies and actions as far as possible to the attainment of their goals. The racial measures inside Germany which were inaugurated in 1933 – marriage loans to encourage lots of the “right” kind of children and compulsory sterilization of those deemed likely to have the “wrong” kind of children, to mention only two – must be seen in this context.

Rearmament measures that were also begun in 1933 pointed in the direction of new wars of the sort Hitler considered appropriate, with the focus on design and production of weapons systems attuned to the anticipated needs of the wars that were intended. The simplest way to see this is in the orders for armaments. Tanks were ordered for the wars against the Western Powers; it is too often forgotten that the conquest of the USSR was expected to be so easy that the first tanks for war in the East were ordered *after* the invasion of the Soviet Union. The single-engine dive bomber was ordered with France in mind; the two-engine dive bomber was designed for service against England; and when these had been developed and ordered into production, the long-range intercontinental bombers, sometimes called “America bombers,” sometimes referred to as “New York bombers,” were ordered in 1937.⁵ Naval preparations followed a similar trajectory. Most of the warships ordered completed in 1933 and 1934 could be seen as rounding out a small contingency fleet. The first major warships to fight England were ordered in 1935 in violation of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement signed that year and were therefore expected to surprise the British once completed and when they appeared in action. The super-battleships for war

4 *Ibid.*, chap. 3.

5 Jochen Thies, *Architekt der Weltherrschaft: Die “Endziele” Hitlers* (Düsseldorf, 1976), 136ff.

with the United States were ordered designed in 1937, with construction begun in early 1939.⁶

Although we know today that the Germans did not employ poison gases during World War II, this had not been the intent. Not only gases of the kinds employed in the “Great War” were being stockpiled after trials in the Soviet Union with the cooperation of that country in the 1920s, but a series of nerve gases was also developed in the 1930s.⁷ The hope and expectation was that these gases would provide Germany with a massive advantage in the war against the Western Powers. The original work on long-range rockets, the project that eventuated into the A-4 or V-2 ballistic missile, was actually designed for the accurate delivery of poison gas.⁸ It all turned out differently from what the Germans anticipated during their preparations for the wars they expected to fight as they worked on them during the 1930s, but it is the direction and nature of those preparations that must be considered. They expected to fight wars with some weapons developed further from those employed in the most recent conflict together with some radically new ones. Certainly the direction in which their preparations pointed was one in which war would surely be even more destructive than recent experience might have led anyone else to expect.

Furthermore, Hitler had repeatedly explained in his writings and speeches that conquered peoples were to be expelled or exterminated, not Germanized. One could not alter the inferior racial characteristics of non-Germans by insisting they learn the German language; education would simply make them more dangerous, not more German. The expansion of Germany, therefore, was to take a form in many ways different from that of prior wars in which conquered provinces or colonies might see substantial destruction and human losses, primarily during the course of the fighting, but afterward, the prior population was expected to be controlled, not replaced. Why did so few understand or expect this at the time, and why are so few willing to recognize reality even today?

Two factors may explain the failure of contemporaries to recognize and the refusal of so many in subsequent years to understand the worldwide aims of the Nazi government. In the first place, as already mentioned, the idea that

6 Ibid., 128ff.; Jost Dülffer, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine: Reichspolitik und Flottenbau 1920 bis 1939* (Düsseldorf, 1973). There is some evidence that the construction of the *Panzerkreuzer*, the so-called pocket battleships, was pushed by the navy with war against Britain in mind – these were to be commerce raiders on the open oceans.

7 Rolf-Dieter Müller, “Die deutschen Gaskriegsvorbereitungen 1919–1945: Mit Giftgas zur Weltmacht,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 21, no. 1 (1980): 25–54.

8 Michael J. Neufeld, *The Rocket and the Reich: Peenemünde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era* (New York, 1995), chap. 1.

anyone could, after the experience of the Great War, seriously contemplate the deliberate initiation of another vast conflict looked so preposterous that it was simply not taken into consideration as a plausible possibility. The efforts to appease Germany in the 1930s can only be understood in the context of an assumption that some sort of European settlement that involved peaceful adjustments – if necessary with colonial concessions in Africa thrown in – was a real possibility and would in any case be preferable to another war that was certain to be even more costly and destructive than the last one. The details of such a settlement replacing that of 1919 might be good, bad, or mediocre; but it would still be less dangerous for those involved than another major war.

The second element of incomprehension then and now is the general cynicism which keeps people from considering the possibility that political leaders for the most part believe what they say and actually intend what they propose. It was assumed then – and is frequently assumed now – that political leaders neither believe nor intend what they say, or at least those things they say that seem preposterous. Here I should insert a piece of evidence from personal experience. Almost every time I refer to a document of 1927 describing Hitler's aims as being worldwide, a copy editor asks whether this is not an error for 1937. Each time I have to explain that the document is indeed dated 1927 and that the original may be found in the National Archives.⁹ People project their own views onto others and forget that others act on *their* assumptions and beliefs, not on those held by later observers or by contemporaries with differing perceptions.

Ironically, Hitler appears to have understood this common misperception. He quite deliberately counted on the reluctance of others to take his moves toward war seriously. Other powers would shrink from hostilities just as long as possible, thereby providing him with time for rearmament initially and concessions extorted by threats thereafter. But there were self-imposed limits on this process. One such limit was personal: Hitler did not expect to live long and repeatedly made explicit his preference for starting war at a younger and more vigorous age than at a later time. The earliest such reference with mention of a specific age that can be found in contemporary records dates from 1938, when he referred to preferring war at age 49 than when older.¹⁰

9 Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, chap. 2, contains the full text of this document.

10 The key document on this is the telegram of Charles Carbon, the French ambassador to London, on a conversation with British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax on Sept. 17, 1938, in *Documents diplomatiques français 1932–1939*, 2d ser., vol. 11 (Paris, 1977), no. 188. Although Lord Halifax had not been present at the Chamberlain-Hitler meeting, and although none of the reports on Chamberlain's other discussions of the meeting contains a reference to Hitler's mentioning his age,

The 1938 situation will be examined further subsequently, but there is the other time factor, that inherent in the German armaments program. It was clear to Hitler that after an interval of a few years, Germany's prospective enemies were likely to react by beginning to rearm themselves. Then their broader resource base would enable them to overtake Germany – and with more modern weapons since they would have standardized their production models later than Germany. Hitler argued that Germany would, therefore, have to utilize its head start in armaments before too long lest it lose that advantage. In 1937, Hitler placed that final time limit into the years 1943–5.¹¹ From these perspectives, it may be easier to understand why Hitler came to see the Munich agreement of 1938 as the biggest mistake of his career, regretted having drawn back from war in 1938, and made certain that there would be no repetition of such a development in 1939; it was peace, not war, that he feared.¹²

There was, it should be noted, one further misconception about Germany's movement toward war. Hitler himself and most of those in his government actually believed the stab-in-the-back legend. Because they believed that Germany's home front had collapsed under the strains of war, strains that internal enemies had taken advantage of, they were very hesitant about imposing excessively heavy burdens on the German home front both before and during World War II. Not only ideological preconceptions about the proper role of women but a general reluctance to risk a collapse of morale at home restrained the German government from imposing total mobilization on economy and people until the later stages of World War II.

Germany's World War II enemies, on the other hand, assumed that the supposedly efficient, thorough, and well-organized Germans had fully mobilized their human and material resources for war already in the 1930s. From this they would draw the equally erroneous conclusion that the German war economy was severely strained in the first years of World War II and could be badly damaged by blockade and bombing. They were therefore greatly surprised by the lack of effect from the bombing and blockade in the early stages of World War II and were astonished to see the increases in production of which the Third Reich proved capable once the turning tide at the fronts suggested to those in charge of Germany that greater effort and a higher level of sacrifices would be necessary after all.

this is assuredly not the sort of thing either Chamberlain or Lord Halifax would have fabricated. The most likely explanation is that Chamberlain mentioned it to Lord Halifax – who was one of his few close friends – in a personal conversation along the lines: "Edward, you will not believe what that man said to me."

11 This was one of the main themes of the so-called Hossbach Conference; see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937–1939* (Amherst, N.Y., 1993), 37.

12 *Ibid.*, chaps. 12–14.

What this meant in practice was that the Allies of World War II moved toward a more complete mobilization of their resources earlier than Germany once they had concluded that there was no alternative to fighting. Until that time, however, their inclination had been in the opposite direction. They had substantially reduced their military forces during the 1920s, and under the impact of the world depression, both Great Britain and the United States initially reduced their military expenditures. By the early 1930s, both had brought their armies down approximately to the size prescribed for Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Rearmament began slowly and haltingly in both countries. The British looked back in horror at the experience of committing large land forces to the continent in the Great War and were quite determined not to do so again. They would instead build up an air force, both to defend against any new and expanded version of the raids they had suffered the last time and to bring such attacks home to the Germans. Those on the British political Left opposed all such measures. It is too often forgotten that in the last election in Britain before World War II, that of 1935, Chamberlain was attacked as a warmonger. It is from that perspective that all members of Parliament from the Labour and Liberal Parties voted against the first peacetime conscription in British history when Chamberlain reversed course and called for the creation of a substantial army in May of 1939.

In France, the later impact of the world depression brought fiscal constraints to the fore somewhat after the analogous situation in Britain and the United States, but then there was a far more substantial rearmament effort than has generally been recognized.¹³ The Soviet Union was, in the 1920s and 1930s, building the industrial basis for a modern military structure; but in the later 1930s Joseph Stalin was eviscerating the Red Army, Navy, and Air Force by systematic purges.¹⁴ From the perspective of the Germans, this only reinforced their concept of a state consisting of racial inferiors ruled by incompetents. In the eyes of the Western Powers, bolshevism was seen as an internal menace, not an external threat.

If people in Britain thought that the commitment of a large army to the continent had been a mistake of the Great War that should not be repeated, the public in the United States became increasingly convinced in the 1920s and 1930s that their very entrance into the war had been an error. As they saw increasing dangers of conflict in Europe and East Asia in the 1930s, their reaction for the most part was to try to devise means by which a repetition

13 The most recent treatment is Eugenia C. Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, Kans., 1996). For further detail, see Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York, 2000).

14 A fine analysis is given in David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, Kans., 1998).

of the supposed mistake of 1917 could be avoided. Not only would they not participate again; they would try to insulate themselves by a series of neutrality laws designed to prevent a repetition of those developments that had, in their eyes, caused the country to enter the preceding war. It is entirely possible that if these laws had been in effect in 1914–17, they would indeed have had that result; the problem of course was that one cannot stay out of a war one has already been in. The challenge of the 1930s was fundamentally different, but most Americans then, and very many still today, failed to see that.

Unable to understand then, as many cannot understand now, that the converse of belief in the stab-in-the-back was that the military role of the United States in making it possible for the Allies to hold in the West and move toward victory in 1918 then became a legend, Americans simply found it impossible to grasp that war with the United States was a central part of Hitler's outlook from the 1920s on. There could be, in other words, no sense for the United States to plan for a contingency that most of its people thought impossible. That the Germans would act on *their* beliefs, not on the beliefs of Americans, seemed inconceivable then; and as the repeated references to the German declaration of war on the United States in December 1941 as an incomprehensible act show, is hard for Americans to understand now.

From the German perspective, of course, a conquest of the globe necessarily implied war with the United States. Americans could not be expected to surrender their independence just because the Germans were so good looking. And since America's military role the last time was believed negligible, such a war was not expected to be particularly difficult; it was just that the right weapons systems had to be ordered. That process had been initiated in 1937, as mentioned above, while the vast quantities of oil needed to fuel those planes and ships were expected to become available to Germany as a result of the rapid and easy conquest of the Soviet Union between the defeat of the British and French and the war against the United States. That in this context of assumptions – crazy but widely shared by the authorities in Berlin – there should be *less* criticism of going to war with the United States and fewer warnings against such a step from those in the German military and political leadership than against any other war measure of Hitler has been, but really should not be, difficult to comprehend.¹⁵

It was under these circumstances, and in view of the widely held American misconceptions, that only the growing danger at the end of the 1930s began to reverse the trend toward disarmament in the United States.

15 Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II*, chap. 15.

In 1937 there was the initiation of a naval construction program; at the end of 1938 President Franklin Roosevelt ordered a substantial air force buildup; and in 1940, under the impact of the German victory in the West, the United States initiated the raising of a large army. Once the attack by the Japanese followed by the German and Italian declarations of war on the United States had forced the country into hostilities, however, the public shifted its perceptions dramatically. Unlike Germany, but much more like Great Britain and the Soviet Union, the United States moved in the direction of a total war effort relatively quickly. It can certainly be argued that the war did not reach into the lives of its citizens to the extent true for the two other major Allies, but this was more the result of available resources and the minimal impacts of direct Axis attacks than of any reluctance in the government or the population at large to harness people and funds to the needs of war. The way in which the United States was precipitated into the conflict created an atmosphere in the country that was conducive to both the most extreme measures of mobilization and to an almost unlimited willingness to employ the weapons that would pour forth from the “arsenal of democracy.”

The assumption of many in the interwar years that any new war was likely to be terrible was based on a fundamentally sound understanding of what had happened in the Great War. The evidence of experience showed that the social mechanics of the modern state enabled it to draw out of societies at war vast human and material resources and to throw them into all-consuming battle. The technological developments of the late nineteenth century and the innovations of the last prewar years had made war more destructive in a physical sense, and the further enhancements of weapons technology during the conflict as well as the new weapons introduced during hostilities had only accelerated the process.

There had been, on the other hand – and in part precisely because of the experience of 1914–18 – some substantial attempts to contain and perhaps reverse the trend toward ever greater destructiveness. The Washington naval treaties of 1922 and treaties outlawing the use of poison gas and even war itself were steps in this direction. In retrospect it is easy to overlook these contrary trends that were overtaken by events, but they were a significant aspect of international relations in the interwar years, attracted massive public attention at the time, and gave many the hope that another disaster like the most recent one could be avoided. All the measures taken to restructure international relations and to contain the horrors of any war, however, assumed a peaceful world, as did the self-imposed land disarmament of the Western powers.

An unwillingness in the United States and Britain to uphold their commitment to France and a general reluctance to risk the lives and treasure of one's citizens in defense of others – such as the Chinese and the Ethiopians – who might be attacked, opened up the possibility for Japan and Italy to resume prior expansionist policies and for Germany to embark on the new road toward world conquest. Only supreme exertions would suffice to thwart these new challenges to the world's peace. Almost by definition, the very nature of the challenge to the world order posed by the aggressors of World War II would oblige the Allies to respond with escalating vehemence and violence.