

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Armageddon
Clive Ponting

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Whitehall: Tragedy and Farce

Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964-1970

Whitehall: Changing the Old Guard

Secrecy in Britain

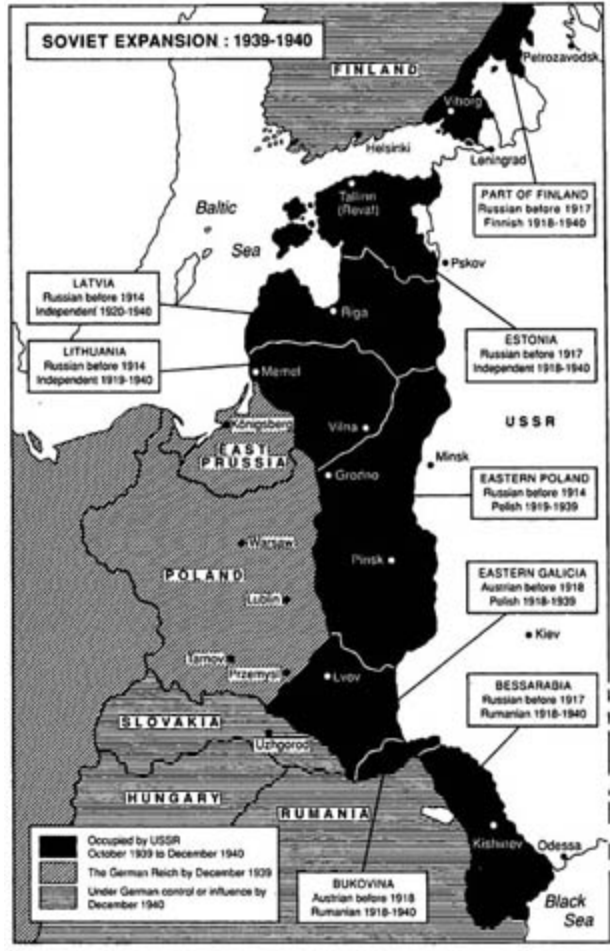
1940: Myth and Reality

A Green History of the World

Churchill







LIMIT OF AXIS CONTROL





To
Laura
with love and gratitude

CLIVE PONTING

Armageddon
The Second World War

VINTAGE

Chronology of Key Events

1939

- September** 1 Germany invades Poland
3 Britain and France declare war on Germany
17 Soviet Union invades Poland
28 Estonia accepts Soviet ultimatum and agrees to Soviet military bases on its territory
- October** 5 and 10 Latvia and Lithuania forced to accept Soviet bases
- November** 30 Soviet Union attacks Finland

1940

- March** 12 Finland accepts armistice and loss of territory to Soviet Union
30 Wang Ching-wei puppet government set up at Nanking
- April** 9 Germany invades Norway and occupies Denmark
- May** 6 Britain occupies Iceland
10 Germany invades Low Countries and France
15 Dutch surrender
27-June 4 Evacuation from Dunkirk
28 Belgian surrender
- June** 10 Italy declares war on Britain and France
14 Fall of Paris

- 17 French request for armistice (signed 22 June)
- 28 Rumania accepts Soviet demand for 'return' of Bessarabia
- July**
 - 1 Rumania denounces Anglo-French guarantee
 - 3 British attack on French fleet at Mers el-Kébir
 - 10 Britain closes Burma Road mid-July-15 September
 - Battle of Britain
 - 28 US embargo on sale of aviation fuel and scrap iron and steel to Japan
- August**
 - 4 Italian invasion of British and French Somaliland
 - 30 Vienna award gives Hungary part of Transylvania and Bulgaria, Southern Dobruja at expense of Rumania
- September**
 - 3 Anglo-American destroyers for bases deal
 - 14 Italians invade Egypt
 - 23 Japan occupies northern Indochina
 - 27 Tripartite pact (Germany, Italy, Japan) signed
- October**
 - 10 British re-open Burma Road
 - 28 Italy invades Greece
- November**
 - 5 Roosevelt re-elected for third term
 - 12 Molotov visits Berlin
 - 20 Hungary, Rumania, Slovakia join Tripartite pact
- December**
 - 9 British attack in Egypt defeats Italians

1941

- March**
 - 1 Bulgaria joins Tripartite pact, German troops in Bulgaria
 - 8 British troops arrive in Greece

- 11 Lend-Lease Act signed
- 27 Coup in Yugoslavia
- 31 First German offensive in North Africa
- April**
 - 5 US occupies Greenland
 - 6 Germany invades Greece and Yugoslavia
 - 13 Soviet-Japanese Non-Aggression Pact
 - 17 Yugoslavia surrenders
 - 27 British forces evacuated from Greece
- May**
 - 2 British invade Iraq
 - 20 German attack on Crete
- June**
 - 8 Vichy forces in Syria and Lebanon surrender to British
 - 22 German invasion of Soviet Union starts
- July**
 - 7 US occupies Iceland
 - 23 Japan occupies southern Indochina
 - 28 US, Britain and Netherlands impose oil and steel embargo on Japan
- August**
 - 9-12 Roosevelt and Churchill meet at Newfoundland. Atlantic Charter
 - 17 Fall of Kiev
 - 25 Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran
- September**
 - 8 Siege of Leningrad begins
- October**
 - 16 Panic evacuation of Moscow
 - 17 General Tojo becomes Prime Minister in Japan
- November**
 - 26 US rejects Japanese proposal to continue negotiations
- December**
 - 1 Soviet counter-attack around Moscow begins

7 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Philippines, Hong Kong and Malaya

9 China declares war on Japan

11 Germany and Italy declare war on United States

1942

January 11 Japan attacks Dutch East Indies

20 Wannsee conference on 'Final Solution'

February 8 Japanese capture Rangoon

15 British surrender at Singapore

March 2 Japanese capture Batavia

11 Cripps Mission to India

April 9 US surrender at Bataan

May 6 US surrender at Corregidor. Battle of the Coral Sea

30 1,000 bomber raid on Cologne

June 4 Battle of Midway. Japanese attack on Aleutian Islands

July 3 Germans capture Sevastopol

August 7 US landings on Solomon Islands

9 Start of civil disobedience campaign in India

12-15 Stalin-Churchill meeting in Moscow

19 Dieppe raid

31 Battle of Alam el-Haifa - German invasion of Egypt halted

September 13 Battle of Stalingrad begins

October 23 Battle of Alamein

November 8 Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa

11 Germany occupies southern France and Tunisia.

French fleet scuttled

1943

- January** 11 US and Britain give up extra-territorial rights in China
14-24 Casablanca Conference
- February** 2 German surrender at Stalingrad
8 Soviet forces enter Kursk
14 Soviet forces enter Rostov
- April** 13 Germany announces discovery of Katyn massacre
19 Uprising in Warsaw Ghetto
- May** 11 US invasion of Aleutian Islands
12 German-Italian surrender in Tunisia
- July** 5 Battle of Kursk salient
10 Invasion of Sicily
25 Dismissal of Mussolini
- August** 23 Soviet forces enter Kharkov
- September** 3 Invasion of Calabria. Italian surrender. German occupation of north Italy
9 Landings at Salerno
12 German forces rescue Mussolini
25 Soviet forces enter Smolensk
- October** 13 Italy declares war on Germany
- November** 5 Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo
6 Soviet forces enter Kiev
22-26 Cairo Conference
28 Allied conference at Teheran begins

1944

- January** 12 Landings at Anzio
27 Relief of Leningrad
- April** 17 Major Japanese offensive in China
- June** 4 US forces enter Rome
6 Invasion of Normandy
12 German V-1 attacks begin
15 US invasion of Saipan
- July** 4 Japanese forces defeated at Imphal
20 Attempt to assassinate Hitler
23 Soviet forces occupy Lublin and establish Polish Committee of National Liberation
- August** 1 Start of Warsaw uprising
15 Allied landings in southern France
24 Allied forces enter Paris
- September** 3 Allied forces enter Brussels
5 Soviet Union declares war on Bulgaria
8 German V-2 rocket attacks begin
12 Rumania signs armistice
19 Finland signs armistice
- October** 15 British forces enter Athens
20 Soviet and partisan forces enter Belgrade. US invasion of Philippines
25 Battle of Leyte Gulf
- December** 4 British forces attack partisans in Athens
16 German offensive in Ardennes begins

1945

- January** 9 US landings on Luzon
12 Start of major Soviet offensive
17 Soviet forces enter Warsaw
- February** 4-12 Allied conference at Yalta
13 Soviet forces enter Budapest
13-14 Anglo-American bombing of Dresden
- March** 9 US firebomb raid on Tokyo
- April** 1 US invasion of Okinawa
5 Soviet denunciation of neutrality treaty with Japan
12 Death of Roosevelt
13 Soviet forces enter Vienna
28 Death of Mussolini
30 Hitler commits suicide
- May** 2 Soviet forces capture Berlin
3 British forces enter Rangoon
7 German surrender at Reims
9 Soviet forces enter Prague
- July** 16 US tests first A-bomb
17 Allied conference at Potsdam opens
24 Allied call for Japan to surrender
- August** 6 A-bomb dropped on Hiroshima
8 Soviet Union declares war on Japan
9 A-bomb dropped on Nagasaki
14 Japan agrees to surrender
- September** 2 Formal Japanese surrender signed

The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept

Thucydides: *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book Five,
89

Preface

The celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of V-J Day on 15 August 1995 recall the end of the most catastrophic war in human history and the destruction of one of the most evil governments to have ruled a modern state. It was a war in which probably 85 million people died – the overwhelming majority of them civilians. Why did all these people die? What was the purpose of the war? In the immediate aftermath the answer was clear – it was, in the title of one of the first books about the war, a ‘Crusade in Europe’. The War Crimes trials also led to what the historian A.J.P. Taylor has called the ‘Nuremberg view of history’. The responsibility for the war was placed solely upon Germany and the Hitler government which had been engaged in a conspiracy against peace and set out on a path of carefully planned aggression. The appalling atrocities committed during the war could all be blamed on the Nazis and their associates. Unlike the 1914–18 war, the Second World War was a clear contest between good and evil – perhaps the closest approach ever to the medieval theologians’ ideal of a ‘just war’.

There can be no doubt that the Nazi government was evil and that if it had not been destroyed the peoples of Europe would have lived under a regime of terror and barbarity. However, this knowledge does not in itself help us understand the complexities of the Second World War. The aim of the following chapters is to try to discover those complexities by abolishing a chronological framework and

by taking common themes and seeing how the various belligerents (and neutrals) responded to common problems. The chapters attempt to see the war in a world-wide context and as far as possible to avoid the British concentration on the war in North Africa and the Mediterranean. There is little here on the detailed tactical handling of forces by military commanders, or maps and descriptions of particular battles. These are exhaustively covered elsewhere and tell us little about the reality of the war. This book focuses on questions such as how the military equipment was produced in the first place, what strategy political leaders adopted and what combat was like for the individual serviceman. In a war in which far more civilians than servicemen died it is important to keep the focus on how societies, economies and peoples were affected by the war and not on how military commanders manoeuvred on the battlefield.

1: Origins

When did the Second World War begin? For the British and French the answer is easy - Sunday, 3 September 1939. For a German or a Pole the answer is 1 September. A Lithuanian might suggest March 1939 when Germany seized the port of Memel. A Czech or a Slovak might argue for September 1938 and the Munich settlement or March 1939 with the German occupation of Bohemia-Moravia and the declaration of Slovak independence. Did the war for the Soviet Union start with its attack on Poland in September 1939, its attack on Finland two months later or, as Soviet historians assert, 22 June 1941 when Germany invaded? For an American or Japanese citizen the answer is different again - 7 December 1941 and the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Chinese would disagree. They would argue the war began on 7 July 1937 with the Marco Polo bridge incident which led to a full-scale Japanese invasion or possibly in 1931 when Japan conquered Manchuria.

Although by December 1941 a number of different conflicts around the world had merged to become the Second World War the origins of the war have to be sought in Europe. The changes to the European balance of power in 1940 drew the United States, once again, into a European quarrel and without those changes it is difficult to imagine that Japan would have sought to alter the balance in east Asia and the Pacific and eventually launch an attack on the European colonial powers and the United States. The origins of what has been called 'The Last

European War', which lasted from September 1939 until December 1941, can be found in the challenge to the existing European states and their empires posed by the emergence of a powerful Germany after 1871 and the peculiar weaknesses of the world and European power structures in the 1930s.

German unity came late in European terms (1870-71) and the destabilising effect this had on the European power structure was heightened by rapid industrialisation in the years before the First World War. In the 1880s Germany produced about 7 per cent of the world's manufacturing output - less than a third of that of Britain. By 1914 its share had more than doubled and was greater than Britain's. In 1890 Germany produced only half the iron and steel output of Britain - by 1914 its output was twice as much. Germany's rapid growth to the foremost European economic power was not matched by a commensurate increase in political power. Britain and France had already acquired extensive colonial possessions but by the time Germany was able to assert its claims it could only establish control over relatively unprestigious areas such as South-West Africa. By the end of the nineteenth century German colonial possessions were smaller than those of weaker European countries such as Belgium and Portugal and there was little room for further expansion. Germany's imperial ambitions were no different from those of other European countries - it was just that the other powers had established control first and were unwilling to give up their gains to satisfy Germany.

Any attempt by Germany to increase its power within Europe and revise the status quo would destabilise the existing power structure. By the end of the nineteenth century the question of whether Germany was to have major economic power but no political power commensurate with it was still unresolved. Germany also

faced a difficult situation within the larger geo-strategic framework. Any bid for a significantly increased world-power role would inevitably challenge the position of Britain - a far smaller country that controlled almost a quarter of the globe. Either Germany accepted a situation of permanent subordination to Britain, or it attempted to transform the existing balance of power. It also had to take account of the rapidly growing strength of the continental powers - Russia and the United States. In making its bid for increased power Germany faced three major problems. First, since expansion overseas was effectively blocked attempts to increase German power were largely confined to Europe and directly affected the other European powers. Second, it was unable to find an acceptable ideological justification for its expansion. Other powers were able to do so: the first French republic and Napoleon had adopted the rhetoric of liberal nationalism; Britain used free trade and European supremacy over lesser races. (Later the United States utilised the ideas of liberal capitalism and the Soviet Union the ideology of communism.) Germany could find nothing apart from the rather too open desire for greater power. Third, Germany found that there were too many other European, and eventually extra-European, powers who were in the last resort prepared to combine against an attempt by Germany to increase its power.

That Germany did attempt to increase its power was not surprising. In the first decade of the twentieth century it tried to expand its power through asserting its interests in colonial areas such as Morocco (under French tutelage) and by building a fleet that was seen as a challenge to British naval supremacy. This effort brought about a transformation in the European power balance. In particular Britain, a state facing increasing threats around the globe, made deals with the powers it had long regarded as its most likely enemies - France and Russia - in order to

protect its imperial position. This inevitably meant that Britain was increasingly ranged with France and Russia (allies since 1894) against Germany and her main ally Austro-Hungary. This shift in the balance of power only increased perceptions in Germany that it was encircled by hostile powers. By about 1912 the German government also knew that increasing industrialisation in Russia, combined with faster mobilisation times and a much improved railway system, meant that the German plans for a European war – defeating France rapidly before turning to face Russia – might no longer be possible in a war after about 1916. In July 1914, therefore, the German government was prepared to take advantage of the assassination of the heir to the Hapsburg throne at Sarajevo and risk a war. It encouraged Austro-Hungarian demands on Serbia even though it was likely that Russia would support Serbia thereby almost certainly bringing about a European war. Although other governments cannot be absolved of blame, Germany bears much of the responsibility for the outbreak of war in August 1914.

Despite initial successes, long drawn-out battles of attrition and the collapse of Russia, Germany was eventually defeated after growing American economic and military power enabled Britain and France to avoid defeat in the west and then, in the summer of 1918, gradually push the German armies back eastwards. Before they had reached the frontiers of Germany the German leadership realised that the war was lost. In early November 1918 internal revolution overthrew the imperial state and ended the war. The Treaty of Versailles and other treaties with the defeated powers demonstrated the extensive nature of Allied, particularly British and French, war aims. Austro-Hungary was partitioned into new states and Poland resurrected. Although the Allies espoused the principle of self-determination this was flouted in central Europe by the

inclusion of the ethnically German areas of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia to give the new state defensible frontiers. Also Poland was given a corridor to the sea at Danzig which separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Germany was largely disarmed - no air force was allowed and its army was limited to a strength of 100,000. The Rhineland was to be demilitarised and Germany occupied for fifteen years.

Although many of the provisions of the Versailles settlement were not in practice carried out - the high level of reparations proved to be unenforceable - the Allies had created major long-term problems. The Versailles Treaty was neither so draconian as to cripple German power permanently nor so lenient as to give Germany any incentive to accept the settlement. Germany was still the largest state in Europe and once it had recovered from the post-war chaos it also regained its status as the strongest economy. The Allies' unwillingness to enforce Germany's permanent inferior military and political position ensured that the disparity between Germany's economic and political power would again become an issue.

A major element in the fragility of the post-war settlement was that the new states of central Europe which had been created out of the collapse of the German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires were weak and riven by ethnic and territorial disputes both internal and with other states. Part of the problem was that they all contained substantial minority populations. In Poland a fifth of the population was not Polish - there was a substantial German minority in Upper Silesia and the 1920 Treaty of Riga with the Soviet Union fixed the eastern border of the country far to the east of the 'Curzon line' agreed at Versailles and incorporated large numbers of Ukrainians and Belorussians. There were territorial disputes with Lithuania over the city of Vilnius which the Poles had

seized in 1922 and with Czechoslovakia over the Teschen area. Lithuania had taken over the German city of Memel in 1923 as its only port. Nearly a fifth of the population of Czechoslovakia was German and if the Slovaks were counted as a separate group then the Czechs were themselves a minority in the country they largely controlled. Rumania had a substantial minority of 1½ million Hungarians in Transylvania - an area they had been promised by the Allies as a reward for entering the war. Yugoslavia was in many ways only pre-war Serbia writ large but the Serbs who dominated the state were less than a third of the population and substantial minorities such as the Croats, Slovenes and Muslims were largely excluded from power. All these states in central Europe were to face the challenge of a Germany whose power was reviving and of the Soviet Union as it emerged out of the chaos of revolution.

No major German politician was prepared to accept the permanent subordination the Versailles Treaty implied, although some were willing to make tactical concessions during the 1920s. A large part of the German population and the political and military establishment did not accept the Weimar Republic which had emerged in 1919 and defeat combined with revolution had spawned a series of right-wing parties that were dedicated to a revival of German power and the re-establishment of an authoritarian regime. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party were one extreme example of this trend and Hitler's ideas were far from being original. The Nazi party began as a small, extremist party in Bavaria and after the failure of the Munich Beer Hall *putsch* in 1923, when he tried to persuade other more senior figures such as Ludendorff into a coup d'état, Hitler was imprisoned for a brief period which he spent writing *Mein Kampf*, his political 'philosophy'.

In *Mein Kampf* and the later 'Secret Book' written in 1928, Hitler displayed a crude anti-semitism learnt from his time in Vienna before the First World War. This was nothing new in German politics and neither was Hitler's belief, shared with many of his contemporaries throughout western Europe, in white superiority - specifically that of the Aryan race - and that ultimately all major political and international questions could be reduced to a racial basis. To this mixture Hitler added a virulent anti-Bolshevism which was also common to most of the right across Europe. Hitler's ideas about foreign policy were equally unoriginal. They reflected the widely held views of the German nationalist right and the almost universal demand for a revision of the Versailles settlement. He argued that Germany needed *Lebensraum* in the east for settlement and to provide resources. He objected to an alliance with the Soviet Union and argued that Germany could best achieve its aims by securing an agreement in the west with Britain and Italy so as to isolate France. In order to concentrate on eastward expansion Germany should drop its claim for the return of its colonies and revision of the Versailles borders so as not to alienate Britain. It is impossible to regard these writings on foreign policy as a blueprint for Hitler's actions in the 1930s - indeed in many respects he carried out the opposite policies once in power. In practice he had vague and general aims of restoring German power and expanding in a way that was consistent with some of Germany's war aims in 1914-18.

Hitler and the Nazi party gained little support in Germany during the relatively prosperous years of the Weimar Republic in the mid-1920s. The onset of the world-wide depression after 1929 however brought about a rapid rise in support for the Nazis. In 1930 the parliamentary system broke down but it was not until January 1933 that the conservative and authoritarian parties of the right were

prepared to allow Hitler to become Chancellor. They believed they could control him and that the Nazi party would provide popular support for their long-held aim of finally destroying the Weimar Republic. They were to be disappointed. It very quickly became clear that Hitler could control the authoritarians such as von Papen and Hugenberg and within a few months Hitler and the Nazis had, with the consent of the other parties of the right and centre, seized power, ended the Weimar system, banned the Social Democrats and Communists and set up an authoritarian regime.

When Hitler first took power his foreign and defence policies were conventional and designed to appeal to the various conservative groupings in Germany - they were probably what any revisionist government would have done. Germany withdrew from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference in Geneva and signed a non-aggression pact with Poland which removed any threat of an immediate attack while Germany rearmed in defiance of the Versailles Treaty. Secret German rearmament had been undertaken in the 1920s and plans to build an air force and expand the army from the force of 100,000 men permitted under the Versailles provisions had been drawn up before Hitler took power. However these plans were bound to take time to implement. In 1932 the German air force consisted of 250 aircraft, most of them converted civilian machines, and 550 pilots. The aircraft industry was very small - in 1932 it produced just 32 machines. After January 1933 the government began an expansion programme - by 1934 nearly 2,000 aircraft were produced but about half of these were trainers to produce the pilots who had been drafted from the army. The new Luftwaffe was not even ready to begin operational manoeuvres with the army until 1936. The army was expanded from 7 divisions to 21 but by 1936 it still numbered only about 500,000 men and was smaller

and far less effective than that of France. Naval expansion was slower still. From 1933 to 1936 Germany spent about 5 per cent of its national wealth on defence, no higher than many of its rivals.

Nevertheless, German rearmament - openly avowed after 1935 when conscription was first introduced - posed major problems for France and Britain. This challenge to their position and the longer-term threat of increased German power and perhaps demands for the revision of the Versailles provisions had to be met in particularly difficult circumstances. German power before 1914 had been contained by an alliance between France and Russia and the tacit British backing for these two powers. The threat of a two-front war had been a major constraint on German policy. Now the Soviet Union was largely shunned and distrusted by the capitalist powers of western Europe. Germany's eastern frontier was no longer with a substantial military power but with the weak states of central Europe that posed no major threat and acted only as a temptation for expansion. In 1917 with Britain on the edge of bankruptcy and the French demoralised by huge military losses and with its armies on the edge of disintegrating, the two powers had been saved from a compromise peace only by the intervention of the United States. In 1919 the US had withdrawn into political isolation - although it was prepared to co-operate on European economic and financial problems, particularly reparations, it was not a member of the League of Nations and would not provide any political support for Britain and France. The withdrawal of the Soviet Union and the United States left a power vacuum in Europe which weakened Britain's and France's ability to withstand German demands.

France's strategic position was poor. The German economy was the largest in Europe - by 1929 its steel