

The Gathering Storm: From World War I to World War II

Williamson
Murray

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FootNotes

Williamson Murray is a senior fellow at the Institute for Defense Analyses. This essay is based on his talk at the FPRI [Wachman Center's](#) History Institute for Teachers on What Students Need to Know About America's Wars, Part 2: 1920 – Present, held May 2-3, 2009. The Institute was cosponsored and hosted by the Cantigny First Division Foundation at its First Division Museum in Wheaton, IL. See [/education/americaswars2](#) for videofiles, texts of lectures, and classroom lessons. The [History Institute for Teachers](#) is co-chaired by [David Eisenhower](#) and [Walter A. McDougall](#). Core support is provided by the Annenberg Foundation and Mr. H.F. Lenfest. Additional support for the military history program is provided by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Stuart Family Foundation, and the Cantigny First Division Foundation.



On September 1, 1939, twenty years and three months after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, war broke out again in Europe. It is one of the great conundrums of history that after the catastrophe of World War I, another massive catastrophic war could have happened, one that brought even more destruction to Europe and world civilization than World War I.

One of the many explanations historians have given is that the origins of World War II are directly attributable to the Treaty of Versailles—that Versailles was much too harsh a peace, and that the Germans should have been given an easy peace that brought them into the European community. From my perspective, this is simply wrong.¹ Too often historians fail to take into account the context within which events happen. Certainly from our perspective today, a wonderful, easy peace on Germany might have made some difference in preventing World War II. But that misses the context of 1919 and how World War I had broken out. It had been deliberately instigated and caused by the German Reich—perhaps not quite to the extent that World War II (at least in terms of Europe) was caused by Nazi Germany, but German behavior in the first months of the war was extraordinary by any account. This is something historians have begun to notice as we come to understand the profound impact World War I had on world history.

Six thousand civilians—men, women and children—were executed in Belgium and northern France by German troops in August-September 1914. The Germans claimed the civilians were engaged in guerrilla warfare; in fact, historians' reconstruction of these events indicates that these were friendly-fire incidents or simply retreating troops. It was an extraordinary atrocity, notwithstanding that it has been overwhelmed by later crimes in places like Auschwitz, where the Germans moved from killing thousands to millions. In 1914, the excuse was military necessity as Germany invaded Belgium and Luxembourg, countries with which Germany had signed treaties promising to respect their neutrality. (The German chancellor told the British ambassador in July 1914 that these treaties were just "scraps of paper.")

In addition to the Germans' criminal treatment of Belgian and French civilians in German-occupied areas, Operation Albrecht in winter 1916-17, as the Germans retreated, devastated approximately 10,000 square miles of French territory. Every single tree was cut down, every well was poisoned, the entire population was removed, and all the bridges and infrastructure were ruined. As late as October-November 1918, German troops retreating from the French territories were poisoning the landscape, flooding coalmines, and destroying factories.

The way World War I ended gave the peacemakers at Versailles an impossible problem. First, no Allied troops were on German territory when the war ended. Consequently, Germans across the political spectrum almost immediately claimed that their army had stood unbroken and unbeaten in the field. But German records and the testimony of

German officers before the Reichstag in 1924 prove that this is false. Some German divisions were down to 200 men, companies were down to as few as 10-20 men, and platoons no longer existed. There were 700,000 deserters by fall 1918. The German Army had been defeated and crushed, but the Germans simply hid that reality. They pretended that they had accepted the armistice because they believed doing so would aid Woodrow Wilson's 14 points campaign. The result, within a year or two of the armistice, was a sense of deep wrong on the part of the German people that had virtually no justification.

Of course, there was no possibility of an easy peace, nor indeed of a harsh peace as in 1945. Versailles fell between two stools. It did not address the fact that Germany was the most powerful country in Europe and (had it not waged World War II) over the next 20-40 years was clearly going to resume its pre-1914 position as a semi-hegemonic power in Europe.

British and French politicians would have been lynched by their populations had they proposed an easy peace. The sacrifices of the French and English people were such that there was no way they were going to allow such an outcome, nor should they have, given German behavior. When General Pershing was told about the armistice in October 1918 and asked what terms the allies should give the Germans, he warned that unless the peace was dictated in Berlin, we risked repeating such a war. He was right.

World War I had a huge, baleful influence on Europe's entire political spectrum in the 1920s and 1930s. Those years saw the emergence of the Soviet Union, a state that rejected the entire European past—both economic and political and the state system—and believed in world revolution. The second great strategic result of World War I was the appearance of what the Germans called the *saison* states in Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, the Baltic States, Finland) that had been part of the great empires of 1914 (Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Germany). These new states were incapable of cooperating with each other politically, militarily, or economically. So while Germany had suffered military defeat, its economic and political potential remained and gave it an easy road to dominating Eastern Europe. In 1914 Germany had three great powers on its frontier, which had given it great strategic and military angst. In 1919, it had only one—France, which had been severely damaged psychologically and economically by the results of World War I.

The European powers' reaction to World War I in the 1920s is extremely important for understanding the context of how Nazi Germany and fascist Italy arose and the events of the late 1930s. There was a sense in Britain when the war was over and the German fleet had been surrendered that Germany was no longer a strategic threat. The conundrum was that economically, prewar Germany had been Britain's most important trading partner. For Britain to regain its economic position in the world, it needed a strong trading partner in Germany.

Moreover, by the late 1920s popular thinking about the war was heavily influenced by a number of stunning literary pieces. Unfortunately, some of the greatest literature of the twentieth century is no longer read in literature courses in universities and high schools because it involves war. Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That* (1929), Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), Guy Chapman's *Passionate Prodigality* (1933), Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1930) were brilliant books, great literary triumphs. There was the poetry of Wilfred Owen among others. All of these were deeply antiwar and understandably so, because all of these men had experienced World War I close up. This literature underlines the crushing impact of battles like the Somme and Passchendaele on the British psyche, which had been completely unprepared for that kind of sacrifice and catastrophe. If you have the chance to travel around northern France and any of the battlefields, it's well worth seeing the great Thiepval memorial to British soldiers, at which there are inscribed 76,000 names of soldiers whose bodies were never recovered. At the Menin Gate there are another 20,000; the list goes on and on.

The attitude in the British polity from the early-mid 1930s through to spring 1939 was that there was no reason why a country should go to war—there was absolutely nothing worth defending. In a world of reasonable men, war could be avoided. The result was a complete ahistoricism and an incapacity to understand the danger that fascist Italy and Nazi Germany represented. That explains a great deal about the British response—in particular, the response of Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister from March 1937 to May 1940. To Chamberlain, all one needed to do

to settle differences between the democratic powers of Europe and the dictators was to sit down with them and list one's desiderata; all matters could be settled peacefully. No matter how disastrous that looks from our perspective, this was the view of nearly the entire British polity at the time. Winston Churchill held a quite different position as he commented in the *Daily Mail* in summer 1934, when Europeans were going on vacation and deporting themselves as if there were no troubles at all even as Germany was arming. Right from the beginning, Churchill understood and made it clear in his speeches and writings that Nazi Germany represented not only a terrible moral danger but a terrible strategic danger. We know that Churchill was right, but his warnings went unheeded at the time.

The American response to the end of World War I was "Good, we can go back and stick our heads in the sand; what happens in the rest of the world doesn't matter." The war was seen as the fault of the merchants of death and the bankers. Combined with that was the kind of irresponsibility that Congress can show at times. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930 destroyed the world economy. It turned a major recession into a catastrophic world depression, which had a huge impact across the board in Europe and the Pacific, particularly on the political leaderships of Germany and Japan.

The French recognized that the Germans were going to come back. They feared Germany, dreaded the future, and understood that they could not handle the German problem by themselves. France had to depend on the British, Russians, Poles, and anyone else who would sign up to help them. When help was not forthcoming, the French were incapable of acting on their own.

As to the Germans, right from the beginning, from 1919 on, there was a deep bitterness, not at the Treaty of Versailles—that was the excuse—but at the fact that they had lost the war. The sense was that somehow history had been unjust and the world had ganged up on Germany, that Germany had been completely mistreated. Moreover, there was a very different reaction to World War I that is difficult for us to understand unless we're willing to read some first-class literature. The greatest twentieth-century novelist in Germany was arguably Ernst Juenger, who wrote probably the best book on World War I, *Storm of Steel* (1920). It's a very disquieting book. Juenger served as a front-line combat infantry officer on the Western Front. He was wounded 17 times. He was awarded the *pour le Mérite*, which was given to very few combat veterans. Juenger thought World War I was wonderful, that every generation should have the opportunity to experience it. He wrote many other novels before he died in 1998 at the age of 102, and his collection of books and other writings is extraordinary. But his great book on World War I was *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*, retranslated excellently by Michael Hofmann in 2003). This was not Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), which was as unpopular in Germany as it was popular in Britain, France, and the United States. *Storm of Steel* represented the German intellectual and literary reaction to World War I. That in itself should tell us a great deal.

There is another important element here having to do with government's use of history. We now know that beginning in 1919 the German government waged a massive disinformation campaign on the subject of who had caused World War I and how Germany had acted during the course of that war.² The arguments of the German government persuaded not only the German population but a substantial number of American and British academics in straight-out misuse of the documents and history of the period. The books of historian Sidney Fay, notably *The Origins of the World War* (1928; rev. 1930) are utter nonsense. The German government got him to write this nonsense by providing him with numerous fellowships to Germany, where they showed him a selected choice of documents which he further distorted.

We also have to understand that while World War I bears a major responsibility for bringing the Nazis to power, the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923—the one case where the French acted decisively on their own—also played a role, as did the Great Depression. By winter 1932-33 some 40 percent of the German working population was jobless. Adolf Hitler came to power by creating an ideology based on race. The Nazis identified the enemy as racial, where the communists and USSR identified the enemy as class. Both of them threw huge numbers of innocent people into categories that allowed their respective states to follow their murderous paths to the future.

I highly recommend the HBO movie "Conspiracy" (2002, Kenneth Branagh and Stanley Tucci), which I've shown to my classes at the Naval Academy. It depicts the January 1942 Wannsee Conference in which the leadership of Nazi Germany decided bureaucratically how they were going to solve the problem of there being 6-7 million Jews on the European continent and how they would get rid of them. It is a chilling, frightening meeting.

In addition to an ideology that defined the Jews as the enemy of world civilization, Hitler argued that the Aryans, exemplified by the Germans, were the center of all advances in world civilization. In order to survive, the Aryans were going to have to expand and enslave the populations of Eastern Europe, which began on September 1, 1939. The German actions in the first six months of the occupation of Poland were not aimed at the Jews, but at the mass extermination of Polish professors, religious leaders, and intellectuals. Jews were crowded into concentration camps. The Nazi aim was to enslave Europe from the Urals to the Bay of Biscay.

After Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933, Nazi Germany undertook a massive rearmament. Four days after he took power, Hitler met with his senior generals and made clear that he was willing to give them a blank check to rebuild Germany's military into the most powerful instrument in Europe. He also made clear that it was going to be used not to restore Germany to the position that it held in 1914, but to overturn the European state system as it had existed since the seventeenth-century Treaty of Westphalia.

The world now entered into the truly depressing period of the 1930s. In 1933 Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations; in 1935 he began rearmament and conscription and announced the formation of the Luftwaffe. In 1936 the Germans remilitarized the Rhineland, from which the French had withdrawn in 1931, well before the Treaty of Versailles had said they had to. There were of course other signposts along the way to the destabilization of Europe. There's a tendency to look at this period as if there was a linear set of events. Yes, there was the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, in 1936 the Spanish Civil War. But those were peripheral events. In fact, Hitler had a meeting in 1937 where a number of his followers argued for giving additional aid to Franco in order to end the Spanish Civil War. Hitler disagreed, arguing that that war was a wonderful smokescreen as German rearmament proceeded on its course.

In 1938, the chickens came home to roost. Chamberlain's government made a major effort throughout the year to appease Germany at almost any cost. The result was the occupation of Austria in March 1938, which was greeted by the Austrians with huge enthusiasm, notwithstanding the continuing Austrian claim that they were the first country to be raped by the Nazis. That was followed in summer 1938 by the Czech crisis, in which the Germans demanded that the Sudeten Germans be brought back into Germany, of which they'd never been a part. A crisis was manipulated by Hitler with the aim of causing a European war. Hitler never believed that the British and French were going to enter the conflict. He believed he could get away with an invasion of Czechoslovakia and wanted to try out his new military. In retrospect, it would have been a disaster for the Germans. We'd be talking right now about a small war that had occurred in 1938-40 and Germany's defeat. But Chamberlain set in motion a set of events that eventually resulted in the Munich agreement of late September 1938 and the destruction of Czechoslovakia.³ Chamberlain believed in sitting down with the dictators and getting them to agree to a reasonable settlement, but of course the settlement was not reasonable. It destroyed Czechoslovakia's independence and chance to defend itself and turned over to the Germans not only the Sudeten Germans but within six months the rest of Czechoslovakia, which the Germans occupied in March 1939.

The British missed the entire strategic framework within which the crisis was taking place. The Czech divisions were a key component of France's capacity to defend itself in 1938, and the Czech army would have been in 1939. When it was all over, Chamberlain returned to Great Britain to huge acclamations and popularity. On October 5, Winston Churchill gave what may be the greatest speech of his entire career to a House of Commons that booed him and was outraged by what he said:

"All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness. She has

suffered in every respect by her association with France, under whose guidance and policy she has been actuated for so long.... Every position has been undermined and abandoned on specious and plausible excuses.

I do not grudge our loyal, brave people, who were ready to do their duty no matter what the cost, who never flinched under the strain of last week, the natural, spontaneous outburst of joy and relief when they learned that the hard ordeal would no longer be required of them at the moment; but they should know the truth.... They should know that we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel with us along our road; they should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged and that the terrible words have for the time been spoken against the Western Democracies: 'Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.' And do not suppose that this is the end. This is the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup."

How right he was. Occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 turned around the European situation to the point that the Chamberlain government confronted a storm of outrage in the country. Accordingly, within two weeks of the German occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia, Britain extended guarantees to Poland and virtually every country in Eastern Europe, none of which it could actually honor militarily, because the Chamberlain government had not rearmed Britain seriously.

Hitler's response to this probably would have happened anyway. He ordered the German high command to prepare German forces for an invasion of Poland to take place on September 1, 1939. The German forces were ready, and the invasion took place.

Chamberlain was not preparing the allies for war, but attempting diplomatically to deter Germany from going to war. That's why the guarantees were given, why the support for the French was now forthcoming both militarily and politically, and why the British were so willing and enthusiastic about reestablishing the connections they had had with France in World War I.

The great question mark in summer 1939 was what the Soviet Union would do. Most of the liberals expected that it would sign up for a great antifascist crusade. We now understand that this was not a liberal democratic regime but a regime of enormous evil. What Stalin understood in March 1939 when the guarantees began to occur was that he had two choices: dealing with the Germans or the Western powers. It took the Germans until June 1939 to wake up to the reality that if the Soviet Union struck a deal with Germany, it could avoid a war, sit back and watch the capitalist powers (according to Soviet ideology) destroy themselves and then come in and pick up the pieces when the war had severely damaged both the Germans and the Western powers. Or it could join the Western powers, defend Eastern Europe, the governments it did not like, and confront a war in the immediate future. It's easy to see what direction Stalin was going to go in. The result was the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, or Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, of August 1939. Stalin and his advisors believed this would minimize the German danger. Again, according to the country's Marxist ideology, Hitler was the puppet of the capitalists. But Germans would follow him much more enthusiastically than the Russian, Ukrainian, and other populations were going to follow Stalin. The Soviet regime had grossly misread the Nazis' power and intentions.

The signing of the August 1939 pact sealed the fate of Poland, which was now in an impossible situation. Again, one of the great tragedies of World War II is the fate of Poland. Nearly 2 million Polish civilians (non-Jews) died in the war. One of the most moving memorials in Normandy is to the Polish armored division, which fought through to Falaise in August 1944. They knew their country was going to go down the drain, that it would be occupied by the Soviet Union. They had few illusions.

The attitude of the Soviets themselves is best summed up by three remarks. The first is a toast Stalin made at the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. He toasted "Heinrich Himmler, the man who has brought order to Germany."

The second came in June 1940, in which Molotov congratulated the German ambassador on the spectacular and wonderful victory of the German Army over the French and the British. The third remark occurred on June 22, 1941, when Molotov commented to the German ambassador “What have we done to deserve this?” He was right. The one agreement the Soviet Union lived up to faithfully from beginning to end was the Nonaggression Pact, and the results for the Russian and Ukrainian populations would be 27 million dead by the time the war was over.

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