

The Pocket History

O F T H E

Second World War

E D I T E D B Y

Henry Steele Commager

Pocket BOOKS, Inc.

NEW YORK

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The Pocket History of the Second World War

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TO MY SON

Preface

THIS BOOK does not purport to be a history of the Second World War in any formal sense. It claims neither comprehensiveness nor authoritativeness. It is altogether too soon to write a systematic history of the war: even our own records are not now, and will not be for years, available to the student; records from our Allies are for the most part unavailable, and enemy records are either entirely inaccessible or destroyed. What this book does present is a series of stories, episodes, vignettes, descriptions, analyses, and historic statements by the men and women who participated in or observed or analyzed the war, all bound together with a very general, and by any rigorous scholarly standards, uncritical running narrative.

The material is drawn from a wide variety of sources. War correspondents loom large, for no other war was ever so fully covered. The radio and the newspaper contribute. Official statements, usually trustworthy enough, inevitably intrude. Here and there an historian or critic, convulsively attempting some degree of objectivity, is allowed his say.

I have not inquired too closely into the credentials of the contributors, nor attempted to correct errors, or what seem to be errors, of fact or of opinion. To do so at this stage would be not only presumption but folly. Some day the official histories will be written, in scores and hundreds of volumes. Some day enemy sources will be available. Some day the great figures, political and military, who contrived victory or were responsible for defeat, will write their memoirs. We will never know the whole truth about this war, any more than we know the whole truth about the American Revolution or the Civil War, or World War I. It is some satisfaction to think that our children will know more of the causes and conduct of the war than it is permitted us to know.

But war is not only a matter of information and statistics. It is felt experience, and no later generation can quite recapture that experience. Here is the story of the war as

Preface

it came to the American and the British people—as it looked and felt while the fighting was going on to those whose business or good fortune it was to be articulate about it.

The task of an editor is always a painful one. Limitations of space have required the exclusion of a great deal of material that ought to be in, the neglect of many major battles, campaigns and even theatres of the war. What is even more deplorable—reprehensible if you will—is that considerations of space required major surgical operations upon most of the source material. I hope the authors represented here will understand, and forgive me for not including their chapters and articles in whole rather than in part.

I am deeply grateful to those who assisted me in collecting the material for this book and seeing it through the press: to my wife, first of all, whose judgment is unerringly sound, and whose unflagging aid made enchanting what would otherwise have been drudgery; to Donald Porter Geddes, who played the role of Simon Legree but did not spare himself; to James Mitchell Clarke, Helen D. Livingston, Mary E. Marquette, Arnold Mitchell, Thelma Sargent, and Ernst Reichl; to the gracious librarians of the Rye Free Reading Room and the Columbia University Library who bore with me patiently.

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

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


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-  Saar Plebiscite, 1935
-  Austria annexed, 1938
-  Rhineland militarized, 1935
-  Czechoslovakia dismembered, 1939

1 How War Came

Collective Insecurity

BEFORE DAWN of September 1, 1939, clouds of bombers and fighters flew eastward into the skies over Poland, raining death and destruction on helpless towns and villages, on airfields, railroads, bridges, and factories. From East Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, and Slovakia mighty gray-clad

armies poured across the frontiers into the doomed country. The greatest of wars was on, a war which was, in the end, to involve the whole world in one vast conflagration.

How did it happen that a generation still healing the desperate wounds of the War of 1914-18 permitted this second and more terrible war to come?

The explanation was to be found in the breakdown of the system of collective security and the growth of international anarchy, moral and political, in the post-war years.

For the emergence of moral anarchy the democracies were unprepared. The breakdown of collective security, however, was neither sudden nor unexpected. Its causes were inherent in the first World War and in the political and economic rearrangements that followed. There had indeed been little real security in the immediate post-war years, but there had been peace, of a sort, and a general acknowledgment of the sanctity of treaties and the necessity of preserving peace and maintaining international law. During the nineteen thirties international law was repudiated and peace shattered.

The democratic powers, victors in the last war, might have enforced the treaty settlements and maintained peace. They could have done this only by a positive policy of cooperation and by applying to the problems of peace the same zealous attention and energetic action that they displayed in the war. Instead each sought its own security and permitted the only effective instrument of international security—the League of Nations—to sink into futility and contempt. They lulled themselves into the belief that trouble could be avoided by the abandonment of the instruments of force and embarked upon the policy which became known by the name of appeasement.

The Rise of Dictators

If the democracies were thus willing to let treaties and international law go by default, the non-democracies were prepared to repudiate and flout them. Across the seas, unappreciated by the average American or Englishman, there had arisen a new threat to peace, to law, and, ultimately, to

American security. This was totalitarianism, as expressed in the political organization of Italy, Germany, and Japan. The essence of totalitarianism was the subordination of all individual or social interests to the interests of the "master race" as represented in the State; its object, the division of the world into spheres of influence, each sphere to be controlled by a master nation; its method, the ruthless use of force. Italy, under Benito Mussolini, had inaugurated the first totalitarian state in 1922; Adolf Hitler, who became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, improved vastly on the Italian model; Japan, long inured to despotism, borrowed methods and techniques rather than philosophy from these European powers who were shortly to become allies.

Totalitarianism had developed in those states that had suffered defeat in the First World War or in the subsequent treaty arrangements, or that had experienced economic collapse and social demoralization in the post-war years. To the discontented leaders of these states democratic processes seemed too slow and ineffectual for the accomplishment of domestic reforms, while the observation of international law and the maintenance of peace implied an acquiescence in the alleged injustices and inequalities of the *status quo*. Totalitarianism promised the articulation of every phase of economy and the regimentation of all activities of society to the service of the State, the suppression of protest and dissent, and the concentration of the whole energy of the nation on expansion and aggrandizement. It promised a solution of domestic difficulties, an escape from embarrassing international obligations, and, ultimately, power and prosperity in a new world order. That regimentation was to be achieved at the cost of liberty and democracy was no deterrent to those who thought liberty dangerous and democracy decadent; that the policy of expansion would usher in a new era of lawlessness and war did not discourage those who regarded law as an instrument for their oppression and who held war to be a positive good. Not for years did the democratic peoples appreciate the fact that this totalitarian philosophy was a

threat to world peace and a challenge to the values of Christian civilization and to the inherent dignity of man.

The Bell Tolls

Early in the thirties the first of these totalitarian nations felt strong enough to strike. Japan, long restless under the limitations of the Open Door policy and the Nine Power Treaty, and determined to establish her hegemony in the Far East, invaded Manchuria in September 1931, crushed Chinese resistance, and, a year later, set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. The United States protested and the League of Nations condemned the aggression, but Japan ignored the American protest, withdrew from the League, and prepared to extend her conquests.

The moral was not lost on other discontented nations. Throughout the twenties Germany had wrestled with the economic disorganization and social demoralization that followed her defeat, and although Britain and the United States had co-operated to ameliorate her condition, the crisis was, by 1930, acute. German democracy seemed unable to cope with this crisis, but Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist party promised relief from economic ills, escape from the "bondage" of the Versailles Treaty, and the union of the entire German race under one strong government. In 1933 the aged President von Hindenburg was persuaded to appoint Hitler to the chancellorship, and within a few months all opposition leaders were in jail and the National Socialist party had a firm grip on the entire political and military machinery of the country. Hitler moved swiftly to consolidate his position and implement his promises. Determined to make Germany the greatest military power in the world, he contemptuously withdrew from both the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations and embarked upon a full-scale program of rearmament. And, as if to dramatize his dissociation from the moral standards of the Western world, he invoked the discredited doctrine of Aryan superiority to justify a reign of terror against the Jews.

By 1935 Hitler felt sufficiently strong and sufficiently

confident of democratic weakness openly to take the aggressive. In January of that year a plebiscite, provided for in the Versailles Treaty, returned the Saar to Germany; having used the Treaty Hitler denounced it two months later, admitted that Germany had illegally created an air force, and openly reintroduced compulsory military service. Faced with these *faits accomplis*, distrustful of one another, and fearful of communist Russia, the European signatories of the Versailles Treaty meekly acquiesced, while Britain ratified the new arrangements by a formal agreement permitting Germany to build her navy up to thirty-five percent of the total British tonnage, with an even more generous allotment for submarines.

As early as 1927 Benito Mussolini had declared that 1935 would be the turning point in European history and had promised the Italians that when that time came "we shall be in a position to make our voice felt and to see our rights recognized." Mussolini thought the time was now ripe to re-establish the Roman Empire of ancient days. Ethiopia, which blocked the way from Italian Libya to Italian Somaliland and which was reputed to be rich in raw materials and weak in military power, seemed an easy victim to start on. Early in 1935 Mussolini persuaded the slippery French Premier, Pierre Laval, to consent to an Italian conquest of Ethiopia, and during the winter of 1935-36 that conquest was consummated. Haile Selassie, the Negus of Ethiopia, appealed to the League of Nations, which, after tedious wrangling, denounced Italy as an aggressor nation and invoked against her the sanctions of arms, credits, and trade embargoes. Italy had arms enough, however, and the exemption of iron, steel, copper, and oil from the trade embargo made a joke of sanctions. It was inescapably clear that the League was impotent and that both France and Great Britain preferred the dubious course of appeasement to the more honorable one of resistance. On March 7, when the conquest of Ethiopia was all but complete, Mussolini agreed to arbitration "in principle"; that same day Hitler denounced the Locarno Treaty, which he had expressly

promised to observe, and ordered his army into the demilitarized Rhineland.

It was clear that similar philosophies produced similar consequences in the realm of power politics. Both Germany and Italy were on record as indifferent to the obligations of treaties and of international law, and contemptuous alike of the League of Nations and of the democracies who so feebly supported it. The identity of interest of these two totalitarian states was shortly dramatized in one of the great crises in the history of modern Europe and of modern democracy—the Spanish Civil War. Restless under an incompetent and oppressive dictatorship the Spanish people, in 1931, had overthrown their decrepit monarchy and proclaimed a republic. The following years were troubled by the conflict of extreme conservative and extreme radical groups. The indecisive election of 1936 placed a Popular Front coalition government in uneasy control of the nation, but reactionary groups still commanded the support of the Church, the great landowners, and—above all—the army. Emboldened by promises of support from Italy and Germany, the Nationalists, as these reactionary groups came to be known, raised the standard of rebellion, and in mid-summer 1936 Spain was plunged into a devastating civil war that had much the same relation to the Second World War that the Kansas struggle of the 1850's had to the American Civil War.

Although the Republican regime was not a democratic one in the American sense, and although it had failed conspicuously to maintain order and safeguard liberty and property, it was clear that its defeat would constitute a severe setback for democracy and a signal triumph for the forces of reaction and of lawlessness. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy saw this readily enough, and promptly made the cause of the Nationalists their own. The governments of Great Britain and France failed to appreciate the implications of this war, or feared that intervention might lead to a widening of the conflict which would involve all Europe. Russia alone actively supported the Loyalists, but was in no position to extend much assistance; and her sup-