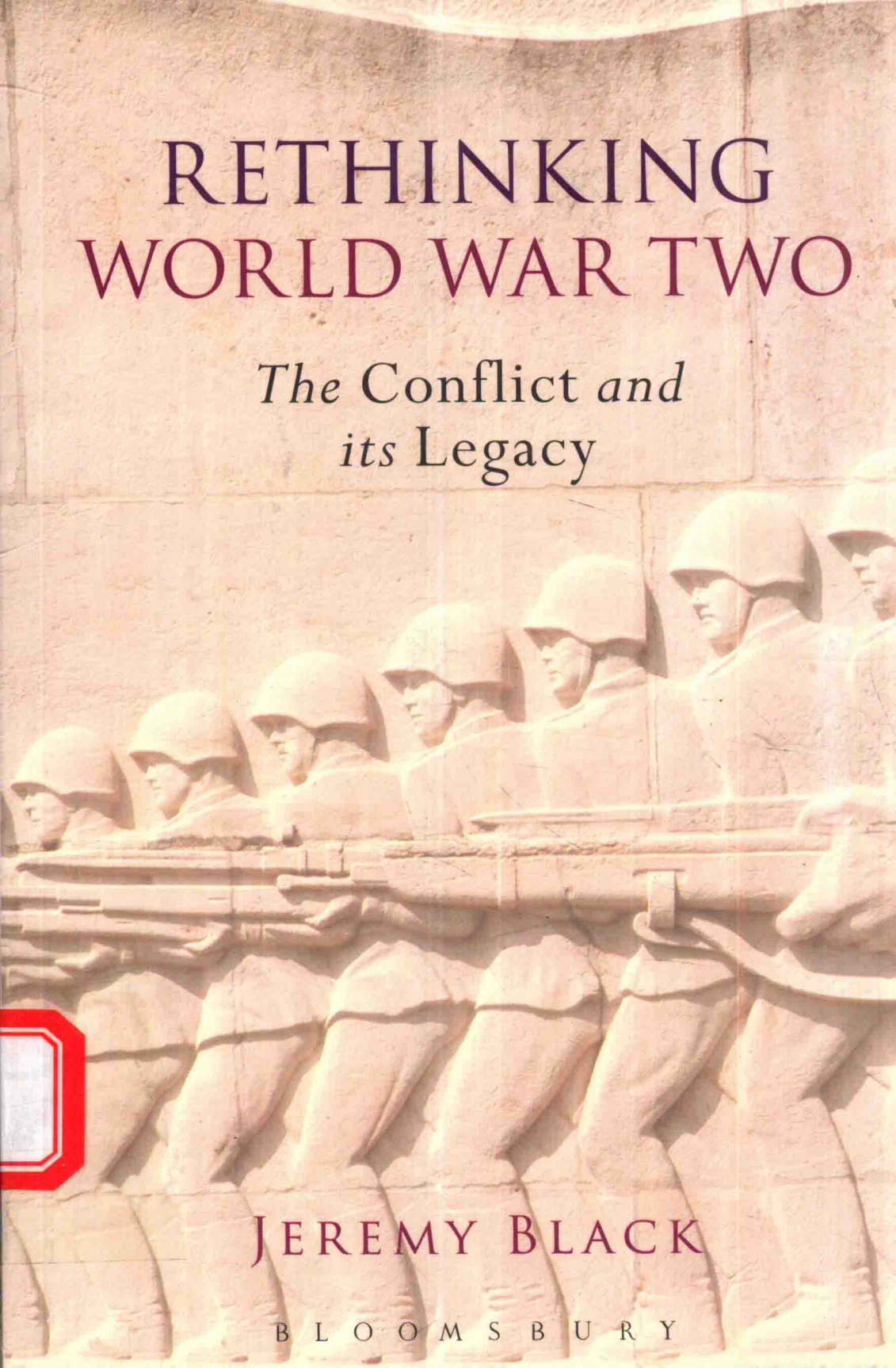
RETHINKING WORLD WAR TWO

The Conflict *and its* Legacy



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Rethinking World War Two

For Richard Overy

ABBREVIATIONS

ADD.	Additional Manuscript
BL	London, British Library, Department of Manuscripts
CHURCHILL PAPERS	Churchill College, Cambridge, Churchill Papers
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
ILP	Independent Labour Party
KMT	Kuomintang Nationalists
LH	London, King's College, Liddell Hart Centre for Military History
MSI	Italian Social Movement
NA	London, National Archives
NAA	Canberra, National Archives of Australia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NKVD	Soviet Secret Police
RAF	Royal Air Force
SS	Schutzstaffel or protection squads of the Nazi elite corps whcih controlled the police, concentration camps and part of the military

PREFACE

History is both the past and our accounts of the past; the two linked but also separate. The accounts are inherently contingent, and the processes of producing and contesting them give rise to controversy. This situation is far from uniform for there are particular hotspots for discussion and controversy. The most prominent, ever since it began, has been World War Two. This book discusses and assesses the leading controversies, both military and political, and links them to a central strand of the war that is generally underplayed due to the focus on the fighting, namely its political character. Moreover, the after-echoes of the war, both military and political, are considered in terms of the issues and controversies of the conflict itself, as well as those that arose subsequently.

The past often is with us more obviously than the present. This is the case for most, not with the immediate present around us as individuals, that which presses most powerfully upon us, but rather with what of the present-day is glimpsed indirectly and therefore generally does not press so powerfully. Thus, if television brings us the news of today, it can also bring us images of the past; and the latter can be more prominent. The images and stories of the past can also seem more newsworthy, for news is not simply a matter of the new moment. Television and book, film and newspaper, are certainly full of images and accounts of World War Two. This is not true of all countries, not the case, for example, with Mozambique or Peru; but, nevertheless, it is the case with many. The global nature of the conflict ensures that there is a widespread aftermath in terms of collective as well as individual memories.

Controversies are to the fore in debates about the war in many countries, as is blame. 'Should' is the key term as far as much of the discussion is concerned, because the point is to blame. Thus, exposition and explanation generally find fault. In doing so, the present refighting of the conflict focuses on trends that are readily apparent in modern culture. First, particularly in the West, but also for example in China, the focus is on blame in a culture in which admonition is to the fore and issues are simplified by presentation in a binary fashion, and notably so in public debate.

Secondly, as an aspect of an oppositional culture that has flourished since the 1960s, criticism and blame are directed from within Western states at previous generations. This process entails a variety of historical targets, for example Victorian imperialists or Field Marshal Haig in Britain. However,

attention is also devoted to refighting World War Two, not least because it is closer in time and prominent in the frame of cultural reference, playing, as it does, a key role in the national account of a large number of states. This context is notably significant in the case of criticism of British strategic bombing and of Winston Churchill, Britain's warleader from 1940 to 1945.

Thirdly, as part of a process that often involves self-conscious revisionism, accounts of the war and its significance are contested by, and among, the defeated. Most prominent among the defeated are those that surrendered at the close of the war in 1945 – Germany (including Austria) and Japan. But there is also debate from those countries which were defeated and surrendered earlier in the conflict, notably France in 1940, Italy in 1943, and the states of Eastern Europe, both those defeated by the Germans (Poland, Yugoslavia, Greece), and those defeated by the Soviets (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary). In part, this questioning is an attempt to come to terms with the past, especially with the French critique of the wartime collaborationist Vichy regime which was created from the ruins of the defeated Third Republic in 1940. However, in part, the issue is a refighting of the conflict that can involve troubling, if not dangerous, revisionist attitudes.

The continuing overhang of the politics of World War Two is a key theme of this book, which aims to look for relationships that throw light on the conflict, on the processes by which events are understood, and on public history. An appreciation of the political issues of the time is important to an assessment of the subsequent politicisation of the discussion of the conflict.

Far more than discussion was involved in this politicisation, as the war was directly linked to what came after. Thus, in many respects, the politics of subsequent decades represented a continuation of the war. This was so in the strength of the Soviet military-industrial complex and the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe, both of which, in turn, lessened the possibilities of Soviet reform. It was also so in the weakness of Nationalist China, which opened the way for Communist triumph there in 1949; in America's rise to a global pre-eminence, but one that was greatly limited on the Eurasian landmass; and in the decline both of the Western European colonial empires, and of Britain.

Each of these trends was apparent, at least to a degree,[1] prior to the outbreak of World War Two. However, the war secured and accelerated them, prevented alternative outcomes, and set the scene for the politics of the last 70 years. Most obviously, World War Two set the scene for the Cold War between the Communist and Western blocs that lasted until the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989–91. Whether victors, defeated or neutrals in that conflict, states found their subsequent history greatly affected by World War Two.

The war therefore is understood and presented here as part of a continuing political process. The domestic politics of the war led into the politics of the memory of the war, with controversies about the events of the war becoming controversies surrounding this memory. This process is most

accurately considered in the light of historical information, methods and insights. That approach, as seen in this book and others, demonstrates that a combination of the appreciation of different views with an employment of scholarly methods does not have to lead to a relativism without judgment or conclusions.

A relativistic approach may seem particularly appropriate when dealing with a war in which there were many combatants, each with at least one point of view that can help shape the historical record and that demands attention. However, as with other historical episodes, some views are more accurate than others. For World War Two, there are many accurate views, numerous inaccurate ones, and a large number of problematic accounts. Thus, the 'we are all guilty' approach is one that makes a mockery of attempts to ascribe relative responsibility, and thereby to make judgments. Our necessary task of doing so is a theme in what follows. In part, this is a matter of trust between the generations (which, of course, is true of all the combatants), but there is also the issue of prudently learning the lessons of a past age. Many of the issues of the war require a near-continual process of discussion because they have such a significance. This is the case most obviously with the Holocaust, the genocidal German treatment of Europe's Jews, which was a key strand of the war as it related centrally to the goals, means and methods of German warmaking.

The influence of the ideas and images of, and about, the war was, and is, more potent than we generally appreciate. To offer a minor personal example, as a 17-year-old studying for Geography 'A' level in the early 1970s, I was taught at length about the central-place theory of Walter Christaller, a theory explaining the location of settlements on an isotropic (all-equal) surface, without being informed of its use by the planners seeking to create a Nazi new world in an East murderously emptied of its people by the German conquerors.

Moreover, the changing and problematic nature of the representation of the war can be illustrated from another personal instance, that of Exeter, the city where I live. The recent building of the Princesshay shopping centre, replacing that originally constructed on the site of wartime devastation, the destructive Exeter Blitz of May 1942, led to an information board that refers first to the British bombing of Lübeck and presents the devastation of Exeter as a reprisal. No attempt is made on this board to offer a wider context, notably that the large-scale bombing of European cities during the war was begun by the Germans with the air assault on Warsaw in 1939.

Readers will have their own views of these and other episodes. In aiming to stimulate debate, this book seeks to engage with the critical faculties of readers. World War Two is scarcely a subject over which agreement can be anticipated, which helps explain its importance as well as its interest.

For the opportunity to develop ideas, I am most grateful to students at Exeter who took my World War Two special subject, to invitations to lecture including on the deck of the USS *Missouri* in Pearl Harbor, at the Naval

War College in Newport, Rhode Island, to Trinity Hall, Cambridge History Society, and at the Edinburgh and Budleigh Salterton Literary Festivals. I have benefited from the opportunity to discuss current debates in East Asia with Yasuo Naito. I am very grateful to Mike Mosbacher for letting me use material previously published by the Social Affairs Unit, to Mark Brynes, Stan Carpenter, Bill Gibson, Tony Kelly, Nicholas Kyriazis, Karl de Leeuw, Stewart Lone, Michael Neiberg, John Olsen, Luisa Quartermaine, Barnett Singer, Roland Quinault, Matthias Reiss, Patrick Salmon, Richard Toye, George Yagi and Don Yerxa for advice, and to five anonymous readers who commented on an earlier version of this book. It is dedicated to Richard Overy who has done so much to advance our knowledge of the war, and marks his retirement from teaching in a Department where he has always proved an exemplary and popular colleague.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Causes

Debate over the causes of World War Two links contemporaries with those who come later. For contemporaries, such debate was largely political, an attempt to mobilise support, both domestic and international. For subsequent generations, in contrast, debate links the issue of war guilt for wartime opponents to more general questions of justification and vindication. As a result, this chapter cannot be readily separated from those on recollection, Chapters 5 and 6.

This chapter seeks to provide an account of the origins of the war down to it becoming global in December 1941. Then, Japan attacked the USA and Britain, while Germany declared war on the USA. Such an account is particularly necessary for the purposes of this book, because it demonstrates that the combatants, and their alignments, were far from inevitable and were certainly not seen in that light by contemporaries. Therefore, the discussion of how these alignments arose is a key issue in the politics involved in the war and its recollection.

This discussion also relates to postwar debates over responsibility, notably because of controversies over Appeasement: the policy followed in the run-up to war towards the expansionist powers that were to comprise the Axis, Japan, Germany and Italy.

Wartime alignments are also crucial to the process by which guilt or praise are apparently established by association. For example, Hungary appears 'bad' because it allied with Germany against the Soviet Union in 1941, whereas the Soviet Union is apparently vindicated for posterity because it was attacked by Germany that year. In practice, an understanding of the policies of these and other states requires a more subtle consideration of their situation, politics and options. For example, Eastern European powers had their own history and interests to consider. Hungary aligned with Germany in order to regain territories lost, in the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, as a consequence of being on the losing side in World War One. Constraints and/or opportunities, and their consequences, can be emphasised in the assessment of the Eastern European powers. It is certainly necessary to note

that there was an element of choice. Thus, the politics of Romania can be criticised not simply because of alliance with Germany against the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944, but also due to the policies it followed, notably genocidal anti-Semitism. Thus, tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered when the invading Romanians captured the city of Odessa in 1941.

Debate over the causes of World War Two is a particularly difficult subject because of the number of different conflicts involved. This number is reflected in the widely contrasting titles, dates and periodisation offered for the war, as well as the danger of assuming clear causal links between these conflicts. Whereas the British date the war from 1939, the Chinese turn to 1937, and there are Spanish commentators who see the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) as the first stage of World War Two. The Soviet Union and the USA did not enter the war until 1941. Furthermore, the debate over the causes has a political dimension because of the continuing significance of issues of responsibility and guilt. As a result, the work of historians is located, at least for the public, within continuing controversies about blame for aspects of the war.

Appeasement

The most controversial aspect of the causes of war relates to the argument that the British and French were partly responsible because of a failure to adopt a robust stance towards Germany, Japan and Italy, the Axis powers, prewar. Voiced at the time, this argument was much employed by the Left during the Cold War that followed the war, in order to hold the West partly responsible for Axis policies and indeed World War Two. This approach shifted the blame to Britain and France, a rather curious response to the goals and actions of the Axis, and one, to a degree, matched by the argument that much of the responsibility lay with the global economic situation, with the Depression of the 1930s encouraging international competition and political support for extremists.

In practice, while systemic factors, such as the sustained global economic Depression that began in 1929, were highly significant in destabilising the international system, Hitler's responsibility for the war is a key element. He operated in response to a background that he did not create, as well as to international circumstances and developments. Nevertheless, Hitler also played a major role in shaping them and in encouraging a mistrust that made compromise appear a danger. The racial ideology and policy of the destruction of Jewry and the subjugation of the Slavs presented an agenda in which racial conflict was linked to an exultation of violence. Ironically, as it sought to direct popular anger the Nazi Press Office was subsequently to attribute the outbreak of the war to the Jews, which was a classic instance of blaming the innocent. Subsequently, the Jews were again to be (inaccurately) blamed for Allied bombing.

The focus on Appeasement continues to play a significant role in current controversies. Aside from this specific argument about the origins of World War Two, there was also the use of Appeasement outside this context, but as part of a call for action. Thus, in 2003 and 2013, opponents of international intervention in Iraq and Syria respectively were described with reference to the Appeasers, as part of a long process of castigating caution.[1]

These lessons have frequently been applied in a far-fetched fashion, which demonstrates their malleability and resonance. Aware of the near-universal usage across the West of the Munich Agreement of 1938 as the key episode of the Appeasement of Germany,[2] the spokesman of Vojislav Koštunica, the Serbian Prime Minister, rejected, in 2007, the proposal by the UN representative for independence for the former Serbian province of Kosovo, by arguing that this would be akin to the loss by Czechoslovakia of the Sudetenland, which Hitler acquired as a result of the Munich Agreement. In practice, the comparison was totally misplaced, not least because the Serbs had treated the majority Albanian population of Kosovo in a much harsher fashion than the Czechs did the majority Germans in the Sudetenland. However, such a comparative judgment was scarcely going to stop the polemical use of the historical parallel. Munich was also employed in 2013, by the Japanese when urging opposition to China's ambitions in the East China Sea, and by Israel when pressing for opposition to Iranian nuclear plans. In 2014, it was employed anew when discussing the response to the Russian occupation of Crimea.[3]

The scholarly dimension is very different, for Appeasement emerges as in large part a matter of circumstances, notably, in the case of Britain, the interaction between far-flung imperial commitments and strategy. There is a corresponding emphasis on the extent to which British policy options were constrained by the need to protect threatened interests across the world. The uncertainties affecting British policy related in part to this situation, but also to the extent to which it was by no means clear, prior to 1938, whether Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union was more of a threat. Furthermore, wherever the emphasis was placed, it was also unclear how best to confront these threats. The eventual outcome was far from predictable. In the case of the Soviet Union and Britain, there was hostility short of war in 1939 to 1941, then alliance against Germany until 1945, and then to opposition between the Soviet Union and Britain in the Cold War.

Some British and French commentators saw Germany as a potential ally against the Soviet Union. Moreover, Hitler initially hoped that Britain would join Germany in a war against Communism.[4] However, in Britain, Hitler's determination to overturn the (much criticised and misrepresented[5]) Versailles Peace Settlement, and to make Germany a great power anew, was correctly regarded as a growing challenge to Britain's interests. In the winter of 1933–4, Nazi Germany was identified as Britain's ultimate potential enemy by the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee. Germany was seen as a graver security threat than Japanese expansionism, even though the latter

was already apparent in Manchuria, the northernmost province of China, a strategically-significant and economically crucial province which had been successfully invaded in 1931. Britain's unwillingness to accept Japanese expansionism in China helped lead the Japanese navy in 1934 to begin preparing for war with Britain.[6] This was a major step as the Japanese navy had developed on the pattern of the British navy, and with its assistance. Moreover, Britain and Japan had been allies from 1902, notably in World War One.

Focusing on Germany, Neville Chamberlain, Britain's Prime Minister from 1937 to 1940, made a major effort to maintain peace, and thus both domestic and international stability and the chance of economic recovery.[7] However, Chamberlain was weakened by his inability to accept other points of view or to learn from experience, and by his self-righteous and continuing optimism about his own assumptions. Indeed, these flaws helped vitiate the conduct of British foreign policy, ensuring that, however sensible in practice and/or as a short-term expedient, Appeasement was developed in a fashion that did not secure its purposes. Moreover, the implementation of Appeasement helps ensure that it is open to subsequent criticism.

Chamberlain feared that war would lead to the collapse of the British Empire and would also wreck the domestic policies of the Conservative-dominated National Government. He was indeed correct on both counts, although he was at error in seeing these outcomes as worse than the victory of Nazism. It was assumed that, if conflict broke out with Germany, then Japan might be encouraged to attack Britain's Asian Empire, which was rightly seen as militarily and politically vulnerable. This vulnerability encouraged the British government to search for compromise with rising nationalism in India, not least with the Government of India Act of 1935. A sense of vulnerability also led to the attempt to create a viable policy of naval support, based on the new base at Singapore (opened in February 1938), for the British Empire in the Far East: Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, north Borneo, British interests in China, and links to the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand.

An American alliance did not seem a welcome solution, as the Americans were regarded as posing a challenge to British imperial interests and, correctly, as unlikely to provide consistent support. This is a viewpoint that can be difficult to recover from the perspective of subsequent wartime and postwar co-operation with America, both of which were crucial to Britain. Nevertheless, it is a viewpoint that helps explain the importance of this later co-operation. British response to Japanese, Italian and German expansionism was affected by the nature of Anglo–American relations, and, in turn, the legacy of these years helped underline later calls for a strong alliance. Isolationist America, which, under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President from 1933 to 1945, had had cooler relations with Britain than those in 1929–31, and which passed Neutrality Acts from

1935, was regarded in the 1930s as self-interested. This, indeed, was a key element in American isolationism. Moreover, the two powers had failed in 1932 to co-operate against Japan during the crisis caused by Japan's invasion of Manchuria.[8]

Isolationist sentiment was strong in the USA, notably so from the reaction against President Woodrow Wilson and his role in the establishment of the League of Nations at the close of World War One. In 1937, this sentiment led Congress to consider the Ludlow Resolution which would have required a national referendum before Congress could declare war, unless in response to a direct attack. That October, Roosevelt's 'Quarantine' Speech, proposing that aggressor states be placed in quarantine, enjoyed only limited support in the USA in the face of isolationist views.[9]

Such views were linked to a conviction that the USA should focus only on the defence of the New World – hemispheric defence – and, despite signs, such as the 1938 trade agreement with Britain, this approach helped make the USA a problematic potential ally. The situation was exacerbated by limited expenditure on the American military in the 1930s. This was not as bad as was later suggested. The oft-repeated comment that the army was smaller than that of Portugal is unhelpful as Portugal had extensive colonies in Africa to protect (and from which to raise troops), notably Angola and Mozambique, while, conversely, the USA spent much more on the navy and air force. Portugal, for example, had no equivalent to the 35 B17 Flying Fortresses deployed by 1941 at Clark Field, America's leading air base in the Philippines. Introduced from 1937, this was the first effective American all-metal, four-engine monoplane bomber.

Nevertheless, the USA had a smaller military than it could afford as the world's leading economy and a major centre of population. Crucially, the USA, in the 1930s, did not press forward with rearmament as its wartime opponents did, as well as the Soviet Union, France and, indeed, Britain. In 1938, the American army could only put six divisions in the field, although it had one of the world's leading navies, an improving air force, and valuable developments in military planning.[10]

As far as Britain was concerned, Appeasement was designed to avoid both war and unwelcome alliances. Britain in the 1930s certainly lacked a powerful alliance system comparable to that in World War One. Although hopes for the French defence of Western Europe in the event of German attack were high, France had been greatly weakened by World War One. It increased its military from 1935 in response to the German remilitarisation of the Rhineland. However, France did not spend as much as a Germany solely focused on a military build-up, had a smaller population as a pool from which to recruit, as well as a smaller industrial base, had major colonial commitments, and also put strenuous efforts into developing its navy.[11]

Confidence in the ability of an Anglo–French alliance to prevent German expansionism in Eastern Europe was limited. Indeed, prior to the outbreak

of a new war, Germany did well in the bitter competition for influence and markets in Eastern Europe that was a key aspect of the rivalry between the great powers.[12] In seeking co-operation there, the Germans benefited from the 'democratic deficit' across much of the region as well as opposition to the Soviet Union.

Moreover, unlike in 1914, neither Russia nor Japan was an ally of Britain. This absence was a key contrast, and even more so because both powers allied with Germany: the Soviet Union in 1939–41 and Japan throughout. However, despite significant economic assistance to Germany, the Soviet Union did not fight Britain, while Japan only did so from December 1941.

In the 1930s, the British government was unhappy about Britain's allies and potential allies. It was also unwilling to explore the path of confronting Hitler by making him uncertain about the prospects of collective action against Germany. Instead, the British government preferred to negotiate directly with the expansionist powers. This political response was matched by Chamberlain's focus on deterrence through a stronger navy and air force, each of which was to be based on Britain, rather than through an army that was to be sent to the Continent. This build-up was an aspect of what was an unprecedented international arms race as it involved airpower over both land and sea, as well as more conventional weaponry.[13]

The policy of negotiating with the Axis focused on Germany, because it was felt that Japan would be cautious if peace was maintained with Hitler. This was a reasonable view, at least in so far as Britain was concerned. It was certainly not so for China, which was the victim of Japanese aggression from 1931 and, even more, 1937, when a full-scale invasion was launched.

Italy, from 1922 under the bombastic and opportunistic Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, was not treated as a serious threat, and, instead, was regarded by Britain as a possibly ally. Mussolini indeed long saw Hitler as a rival in Austria and the Balkans, although he shared both Hitler's contempt for the democracies and his opposition to Britain and France. These views became more important for him in the late 1930s.

On the part of Britain, a sense that compromise with Germany was possible, combined with a lack of interest in the areas threatened by German expansionism, encouraged a conciliatory search for a settlement; as did the extent that few were in other than denial about what Nazism was really like, in both domestic and international policy. In some respects, there was an attempt to re-integrate Germany into the international order that was comparable to the treatment of France after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815. Thus, Hitler was treated as another Napoleon III, the expansionist and bellicose ruler of France (first as President and then as Emperor) from 1848 to 1870. Yet, such an approach was mistaken. The search for compromise with Hitler was not only unsuccessful, other than as a series of concessions, but also, arguably, discouraged potential allies against Germany.

Nevertheless, a problem with the postwar and current emphasis on the follies and failure of Appeasement is that, at the popular level, this emphasis