

**THE
SECOND
WORLD
WAR**

AUTHOR OF *D-DAY*

**ANTONNY
BEVOR**

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

ANTONY BEEVOR



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THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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D-Day – The Battle for Normandy

To Michael Howard

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The Korean Yang Kyoungjong who had been forcibly conscripted in turn by the Imperial Japanese Army, the Red Army and the Wehrmacht, is taken prisoner by the Americans in Normandy in June 1944.

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Introduction

In June 1944, a young soldier surrendered to American paratroopers in the Allied invasion of Normandy. At first his captors thought that he was Japanese, but he was in fact Korean. His name was Yang Kyoungjong.

In 1938, at the age of eighteen, Yang had been forcibly conscripted by the Japanese into their Kwantung Army in Manchuria. A year later, he was captured by the Red Army after the Battle of Khalkhin Gol and sent to a labour camp. The Soviet military authorities, at a moment of crisis in 1942, drafted him along with thousands of other prisoners into their forces. Then, early in 1943 he was taken prisoner by the German army at the Battle of Kharkov in Ukraine. In 1944, now in German uniform, he was sent to France to serve with an *Ostbataillon* supposedly boosting the strength of the Atlantic Wall at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula inland from Utah Beach. After time in a prison camp in Britain, he went to the United States where he said nothing of his past. He settled there and finally died in Illinois in 1992.

In a war which killed over sixty million people and had stretched around the globe, this reluctant veteran of the Japanese, Soviet and German armies had been comparatively fortunate. Yet Yang remains perhaps the most striking illustration of the helplessness of most ordinary mortals in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming historical forces.

Europe did not stumble into war on 1 September 1939. Some historians talk of a 'thirty years' war' from 1914 to 1945, with the First World War as 'the original catastrophe'. Others maintain that the 'long war', which began with the Bolshevik coup d'état of 1917, continued as a 'European Civil War' until 1945, or even lasted until the fall of Communism in 1989.

History, however, is never tidy. Sir Michael Howard argues persuasively that Hitler's onslaught in the west against France and Britain in 1940 was in many ways an extension of the First World War. Gerhard Weinberg also insists that the war which began with the invasion of Poland in 1939 was the start of Hitler's drive for *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east, his key objective. This is indeed true, yet the revolutions and civil wars between 1917 and 1939 are bound to complicate the pattern. For example, the left has always believed passionately that the Spanish Civil War marked the beginning of the Second World War, while the right claims that it repre-

sented the opening round of a Third World War between Communism and 'western civilization'. At the same time, western historians have usually overlooked the Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945, and the way that it merged into the world war. Some Asian historians, on the other hand, argue that the Second World War began in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

Arguments on the subject can go round and round, but the Second World War was clearly an amalgamation of conflicts. Most consisted of nation against nation, yet the international civil war between left and right permeated and even dominated many of them. It is therefore important to look back at some of the circumstances which led to this, the cruellest and most destructive conflict which the world has ever known.

The terrible effects of the First World War had left France and Britain, the principal European victors, exhausted and determined at any price not to repeat the experience. Americans, after their vital contribution to the defeat of Imperial Germany, wanted to wash their hands of what they saw as a corrupt and vicious Old World. Central Europe, fragmented by new frontiers drawn at Versailles, faced the humiliation and penury of defeat. Their pride shattered, officers of the *Kaiserlich und Königlich* Austro-Hungarian army experienced a reversal of the Cinderella story, with their fairytale uniforms replaced by the threadbare clothes of the unemployed. The bitterness of most German officers and soldiers at their defeat was intensified by the fact that until July 1918 their armies had been unbeaten, and that made the sudden collapse at home appear all the more inexplicable and sinister. In their view, the mutinies and revolts within Germany during the autumn of 1918 which precipitated the abdication of the Kaiser had been caused entirely by Jewish Bolsheviks. Left-wing agitators had indeed played a part and the most prominent German revolutionary leaders in 1918–19 had been Jewish, but the main causes behind the unrest had been war-weariness and hunger. The German right's pernicious conspiracy theory – the stab-in-the-back legend – was part of its inherent compulsion to confuse cause and effect.

The hyper-inflation of 1923–4 undermined both the certainties and the rectitude of the Germanic bourgeoisie. The bitterness of national and personal shame produced an incoherent anger. German nationalists dreamed of the day when the humiliation of the Versailles *Diktat* could be reversed. Life improved in Germany during the second half of the 1920s, mainly due to massive American loans. But the world depression, which began after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, hit Germany even harder once Britain and other countries left the gold standard in September 1931. Fear of another round of hyper-inflation persuaded Chancellor Brüning's government

to maintain the Reichsmark's link to the price of gold, making it overvalued. American loans had ceased, and protectionism cut off German export markets. This led to mass unemployment, which dramatically increased the opportunity for demagogues promising radical solutions.

The crisis of capitalism had accelerated the crisis of liberal democracy, which was rendered ineffective in many European countries by the fragmentary effect of voting by proportional representation. Most of the parliamentary systems which had sprung up following the collapse of three continental empires in 1918 were swept away, unable to cope with civil strife. And ethnic minorities, which had existed in comparative peace under the old imperial regimes, were now threatened by doctrines of national purity.

Recent memories of the Russian Revolution and the violent destruction of other civil wars in Hungary, Finland, the Baltic states and indeed Germany itself, greatly increased the process of political polarization. The cycle of fear and hatred risked turning inflammatory rhetoric into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as events in Spain soon showed. Manichaeian alternatives are bound to break up a democratic centrism based on compromise. In this new collectivist age, violent solutions appeared supremely heroic to intellectuals of both left and right, as well as to embittered ex-soldiers from the First World War. In the face of financial disaster, the authoritarian state suddenly seemed to be the natural modern order throughout most of Europe, and an answer to the chaos of factional strife.

In September 1930, the National Socialist Party's share of the vote jumped from 2.5 per cent to 18.3. The conservative right in Germany, which had little respect for democracy, effectively destroyed the Weimar Republic, and thus opened the door for Hitler. Gravely underestimating Hitler's ruthlessness, they thought that they could use him as a populist puppet to defend their idea of Germany. But he knew exactly what he wanted, while they did not. On 30 January 1933, Hitler became chancellor and moved rapidly to eliminate all potential opposition.

The tragedy for Germany's subsequent victims was that a critical mass of the population, desperate for order and respect, was eager to follow the most reckless criminal in history. Hitler managed to appeal to their worst instincts: resentment, intolerance, arrogance and, most dangerous of all, a sense of racial superiority. Any remaining belief in a *Rechtsstaat*, a nation based on respect for the rule of law, crumpled in the face of Hitler's insistence that the judicial system must be the servant of the new order. Public institutions – the courts, the universities, the general staff and the press – kowtowed to the new regime. Opponents found themselves helplessly isolated and insulted as traitors to the new definition of the Fatherland, not only by the regime itself, but also by all those who supported it. The Gestapo, unlike Stalin's own secret police, the NKVD, was surprisingly idle. Most of its arrests were purely in

response to denunciations of people by their fellow Germans.

The officer corps, which had prided itself on an apolitical tradition, also allowed itself to be wooed by the promise of increased forces and massive rearmament, even though it despised such a vulgar, ill-dressed suitor. Opportunism went hand in hand with cowardice in the face of authority. The nineteenth-century chancellor Otto von Bismarck himself once remarked that moral courage was a rare virtue in Germany, but it deserted a German completely the moment he put on a uniform. The Nazis, not surprisingly, wanted to get almost everyone into uniform, not least the children.

Hitler's greatest talent lay in spotting and exploiting the weakness of his opponents. The left in Germany, bitterly divided between the German Communist Party and the Social Democrats, had presented no real threat. Hitler easily out-manoeuvred the conservatives who thought, with naive arrogance, that they could control him. As soon as he had consolidated his power at home with sweeping decrees and mass imprisonment, he turned his attention to breaking the Treaty of Versailles. Conscription was re-introduced in 1935, the British agreed to an increase in the German navy and the Luftwaffe was openly constituted. Britain and France made no serious protest at the accelerated programme of rearmament.

In March 1936, German troops reoccupied the Rhineland in the first overt breach of the Versailles and Locarno treaties. This slap in the face to the French, who had occupied the region over a decade earlier, ensured widespread adulation of the Führer in Germany, even among many who had not voted for him. Their support and the supine Anglo-French reaction gave Hitler the nerve to continue on his course. Single-handed, he had restored German pride, while rearmament, far more than his vaunted public works programme, halted the rise in unemployment. The brutality of the Nazis and the loss of freedom seemed to most Germans a small price to pay.

Hitler's forceful seduction of the German people began to strip the country of human values, step by step. Nowhere was the effect more evident than in the persecution of the Jews, which progressed in fits and starts. Yet contrary to general belief, this was often driven more from within the Nazi Party than from above. Hitler's apocalyptic rants against Jews did not necessarily mean that he had already decided on a 'Final Solution' of physical annihilation. He was content to allow SA (Sturmabteilung) stormtroopers to attack Jews and their businesses and steal their possessions to satisfy an incoherent mixture of greed, envy and imagined resentment. At that stage Nazi policy aimed at stripping Jews of civil rights and everything they owned, and then through humiliation and harassment to force them to leave Germany. 'The Jews must get out of Germany, yes out of the whole of Europe,' Hitler told his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels on 30 November 1937. 'That will take some time yet, but will and must happen.'