

**Documents and Debates**

# THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR



Victor Mallia-Milanes

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General Editor: John Wroughton M.A., F.R.Hist.S.

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# General Editor's Preface

This book forms part of a series entitled *Documents and Debates*, which is aimed primarily at sixth formers. The earlier volumes in the series each covered approximately one century of history, using material both from original documents and from modern historians. The more recent volumes, however, are designed in response to the changing trends in history examinations at 18 plus, most of which now demand the study of documentary sources and the testing of historical skills. Each volume therefore concentrates on a particular topic within a narrower span of time. It consists of eight sections, each dealing with a major theme in depth, illustrated by extracts drawn from primary sources. The series intends partly to provide experience for those pupils who are required to answer questions on documentary material at A-level, and partly to provide pupils of all abilities with a digestible and interesting collection of source material, which will extend the normal textbook approach.

This book is designed essentially for the pupil's own personal use. The author's introduction will put the period as a whole into perspective, highlighting the central issues, main controversies, available source material and recent developments. Although it is clearly not our intention to replace the traditional textbook, each section will carry its own brief introduction, which will set the documents into context. A wide variety of source material has been used in order to give the pupils the maximum amount of experience – letters, speeches, newspapers, memoirs, diaries, official papers, Acts of Parliament, Minute Books, accounts, local documents, family papers, etc. The questions vary in difficulty, but aim throughout to compel the pupil to think in depth by the use of unfamiliar material. Historical knowledge and understanding will be tested, as well as basic comprehension. Pupils will also be encouraged by the questions to assess the reliability of evidence, to recognise bias and emotional prejudice, to reconcile conflicting accounts and to extract the essential from the irrelevant. Some questions, *marked with an asterisk*, require knowledge outside the immediate extract and are intended for further research or discussion, based on the pupil's general knowledge of the period. Finally, we hope that students using this material will learn something of the nature of historical inquiry and the role of the historian.

John Wroughton

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# *The Origins of the Second World War*

~~The peace settlements signed at Versailles after the First World War in June 1919 resulted in no real or lasting peace. At best they permitted an uneasy and precarious armistice which lasted scarcely twenty years. Europe was then plunged once more into that new and greater conflict known as the Second World War.~~

Sumner Welles, *Where are we heading?*

It is one of history's major ironies that the origins of the Second World War are generally traced to ~~the way the statesmen at the Paris Conference in 1919 tried to elicit permanent peace and order out of the chaos in which both victors and defeated languished. The task of reconstruction had been formidable. Amid widely divergent cultural attitudes, the early postwar years were replete with high-sounding professions of faith and noble principles, with discordant follies, blunders and contradictions, with disconcerting problems and disappointed aspirations, with vindictive decisions that were almost 'foredoomed to failure'.~~

The unwise partition of the Habsburg monarchy, 'a stabilising influence in south-eastern Europe', into little, independent and defenceless 'succession states' revived the old medieval *Drang nach Osten* objective of the Germans. With Russia diminished and withdrawn into revolutionary isolation, the peacemakers unwittingly rendered more feasible the realisation of the innate German desire to expand eastward. By reducing 'the former Habsburg metropolis to the proportions of a dwarf, the Allies were virtually offering Austria to Germany as a gift' (Marc Ferro). Sumner Welles called the Polish Corridor 'a fatal mistake'. Were not the decisions to separate the 'indisputably German city' of Danzig from Germany and to 'attribute' the Sudeten German population to Czechoslovakia and the 'Magyars of Transylvania' to Roumania equally so? It appears that the Allies' belief in the principle of national self-determination was ~~less influential in determining the final peace settlement than their desire to create a new balance of power.~~ They grossly underestimated Japanese and Italian discontent. They mistook the 'national rage' of the Germans for a temporary 'sign of defeat'. Versailles had remorselessly forced upon Berlin the bitter experience of what has been termed



'the full reality of defeat': the loss of continental and overseas territories, army reduction, the confiscation of their fleet and severe reparations. The occupation of the left bank of the Rhine for fifteen years was intended to allay the French obsession with security and guarantee fulfilment of Treaty obligations. But unlike the Habsburg monarchy, Germany was spared drastic partition and was cynically allowed to enjoy the potential of 'the most powerful European continental state' (Grenville). Were the peacemakers in fact 'losing the peace at the moment they won the war'? It was in Germany that the grievances generated by the settlement found their major driving force. From 'the moment [Adolf Hitler] became a political agitator', they found in him a hysterical revanchist voice of restless protest and ruthless revisionism.

Under the pervasive influence of Woodrow Wilson's political philosophy, it was believed at the time that peace could be preserved and reconciliation of all present and future conflicting interests achieved through the international machinery of the League of Nations. What was not appreciated then was that if 'the combination of power needed to achieve Germany's collapse in 1918, without which a Treaty on the lines of Versailles could never have been imposed, did not remain available to uphold its terms' (Michael Balfour), the prospects of consolidating the peace would be poor indeed. In this sense one of the heaviest blows to the League came from the United States. The American Senate first declined to ratify it and then, eventually, retreated to isolationism.

With the exception of a few isolated outbursts of dissension, the undercurrents of resentment and discontent remained subdued during the next decade. The twenties were years of relative calm, marked by what appeared to be a sense of political stability, economic recovery and promising self-confidence. Peaceful diplomacy succeeded in fostering international cooperation among the more important nations of the world, leading from the Dawes Plan to the Locarno Agreements, Germany's entry into the League of Nations, the Pact of Paris and the Young Plan. But the inner ferment and unease of European society were forcibly manifesting themselves in novel artistic attitudes and literary styles whose discordance with established norms and values called all accepted realities in doubt. The 'disaffected intelligentsia' sought to explore unconventional modes of expression, free of all traditional restraints and, in so doing, glorified the unorthodox, the irrational, the subconscious. Was this intellectual and artistic aspiration to distort known reality and reveal the moral bankruptcy of society a sour foretaste of the violent upheaval ahead?

In October 1929 the onset of the Great Depression shattered economic recovery. There was a catastrophic decline in world

trade, international investment 'virtually ceased' and it became 'increasingly difficult' to balance international accounts 'long before the financial panic swept so many currencies off the gold standard' (*World Economic Survey 1932-33*). There was heavy widespread unemployment everywhere. The promising Locarno era was suddenly replaced by economic warfare, which led rapidly to a chain of developments that 'reinforced the division of the world' and underscored the inherent powerlessness of the League of Nations as an international peacekeeping body. The great depression, and the consequences of the depression, caused 'a sinister transformation' of the entire international atmosphere. Growth of autarky, massive rearmament, unrestrained aggression, failure of 'collective security' and a provocative disregard of the League became the characteristic features of the 1930s. Japan defied the League in 1931 and left it two years later over the issue of Manchuria. Mussolini outdared the League in 1935 when he invaded Abyssinia, thereby creating a chasm between Fascist Italy and the western democracies. Adolf Hitler 'defied the entire system of international relations when he repudiated the Versailles system in 1935' and, in defiance of all treaty obligations, occupied the Rhineland in 1936, denouncing the Locarno Treaty which he had voluntarily signed. 'No one lifted a finger to stop' Nazi Germany (Lord Ismay) or any other aggressor. Or if they did, they did so halfheartedly. The division of the world became further pronounced during the civil war in Spain, with the Fascist regimes supporting the rebels, the Soviet Union backing the legitimate Republican government, and the western Allies defending passively the principle of nonintervention. This politico-ideological division was consolidated by the formation first of the Rome-Berlin Axis and then by the Fascist Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Triangle when Mussolini joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1937. The western democracies never enjoyed the benefits of a formal alliance with the United States.

The student of the later interwar period would do well to reflect on whether it was Nazi Germany's aggression and her barefaced defiance of all international accords or the highly controversial policy of appeasement pursued by Britain and France that ultimately led to the achievement of Hitler's 'brilliant and bloodless successes' from his first coup in March 1936 to his fifth on 22 March 1939. In his *Memoirs* Lord Ismay recorded his impressions of the western powers' reaction to Hitler's *Anschluss* with Austria:

It was a sign of the times that this example of rapine was almost taken for granted. Russia's proposal to have a conference was ignored. France contented herself with reaffirming her guarantee to Czechoslovakia. Great Britain, who had always contemplated some sort of union between Germany and Austria, did nothing except register disapproval

of Hitler's methods. And Mussolini, so far from moving troops to the Brenner Pass, earned Hitler's undying gratitude by his acquiescence in the Anschluss.

It was a perfect replica of the western attitude to the Nazi remilitarisation of the Rhineland and would be repeated at least once more at Munich in 1938. The advocates of the European status quo seemed to have lost all sense of urgency. In the context of Hitler's fearless drive against all odds, appeasement has often been considered a symptom of decadence, a policy of weakness and surrender which convinced the *Führer* 'that neither [Britain] nor France' was 'capable of fighting a war'. Was appeasement in fact motivated by an inherent hatred of war or by a realistic awareness of military unpreparedness? Or was it the fear of the revolutionary contagion of Bolshevism, traced back perhaps to Béla Kun's success, that induced, if not compelled, Britain and France to appease the dictators? If so, it was a grievous fault. Welles called the belief 'that democracy and Communism cannot simultaneously exist in the world' an 'insane delusion'.

'[T]he causes' of the Second World War, says Taylor, 'are embarrassingly many'. It is not the purpose of this book to assign responsibility or blame for the occurrence of the war to any particular event or sequence of events. It is intended rather to study the 'antecedents' that are generally recognised as relevant to its outbreak in Europe on 1 September 1939 without attributing to them any causal status, to diagnose through the close study of documentary evidence the conditions, attitudes, ideas and personalities which, both in their individual capacity and through their collective interrelationship, moulded the interwar period. Each of the eight sections below concentrates on a major theme. This, it is hoped, will allow the student to form his own causal judgements, establish his own 'hierarchy of causes' and arrive leisurely at *his* interpretation.

Abundant official diplomatic documentation is now available in various languages. Other primary source material is easily accessible in the form of memoirs of leading personalities, very often published 'to justify themselves', diaries, speeches of statesmen and politicians, autobiographies, contemporary or near-contemporary accounts of events and collections of private correspondence. An intelligent use of the press as a gauge of public opinion is certain to yield excellent results.

There is also an extensively rich secondary literature in English, including articles in learned journals, on nearly all major aspects of the interwar years. Of outstanding significance is A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War*, if only for the debate which it had so fiercely provoked and the profound impact it has made on historical thinking. A quarter-century after its first publication in

1961, it still guarantees 'exciting and fascinating' reading. Equally stimulating and generously rewarding to the student of the international relations between the two world wars are the views of Taylor's major critics exposed in the collections of essays on the Second World War edited by Esmonde M. Robertson (1971), W. Roger Lewis (1972) and Gordon Martel (1986).

# I Hopes, Fears and Follies 1919–23

## Introduction

Two distinct forms of idealism – Wilsonism and Bolshevism – enlightened the final peace settlement in 1919, the one through seeming admiration, the other through genuine fear.

The principles of universal democracy and national self-determination, enshrined in Wilson's celebrated 'Fourteen Points' constituted the first Utopian vision. Abhorring the futility and inhumanity of the recent experience, this vision was to form the bedrock of the final settlement and the Covenant of the League of Nations, whose *raison d'être* was 'to restrict war and make peace more positive'. Wilsonism was however as unrealistic as it was controversial. How would such broad principles placate the tigerish fury of Clemenceau? How far can it be deemed democratic to impose a democratic form of government upon a nation where responsible parliamentary government had no tradition? What real chances of survival, if not efficiency, could it have?

Bolshevism, on the other hand, loomed 'larger in men's minds and fears in 1919 than anything else in the post-war world' (Thomson). Internal revolutions and military catastrophe had not only driven Russia out of the war; they turned her out of Europe. But though in the western view Russia ceased to exist as a great power, her new political ideology still haunted Europe 'as a spectre' (Taylor). Were not the Spartacists in Germany and Béla Kun's regime in Hungary clear enough evidence? The dissolution of the Habsburg Empire into its component racial fragments further confined Russia by means of a *cordon sanitaire* into a state of isolationism. But was not this a case of mutual exclusion?

The final peace settlement 'failed to ensure a peaceful future'. It had included 'no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe, nothing to make the defeated Central Empires into good neighbours, nothing to stabilize the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia' (Keynes). The years 1919–23 betray its unworkability and short-sightedness. Germany had been decisively reduced to an impotent nation, 'defeated, disarmed and hungry' (Churchill) and, by the forced acceptance of the *diktat*, most profoundly humiliated. But she was neither destroyed nor

disunited. Her threatening potential, even if largely psychological at this stage, forced France, obsessed with security and reparations, to seek guarantees against aggression in a series of mutual alliances with the 'successor states' and, eventually, to occupy the Ruhr. Italy's uproar over her claim to Fiume not only underscored the inherent flaws of secret diplomacy; it soon led to D'Annunzio's escapade and Mussolini's 'March on Rome'.

In any attempt to assess the soundness of the 1919 settlement other important questions arise. Why was Paris, the capital of a country 'bled white by the war', chosen as the venue for the Peace Conference, and not, for example, neutral Geneva? Was the application of the principle of self-determination the realisation of an ideal which the peacemakers ardently believed in, or simply a *fait accompli* which they could not but accept and recognise? To what extent was the attitude adopted towards Germany at Versailles genuinely objective, just and realistic? To what extent was it innately vindictive to satisfy the prevailing temper and bitter resentment of the suffering masses? It was the masses after all who had given Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando 'an emphatic mandate . . . that the enemy must be made to pay' – a psychological reward for their sufferings. In the final resort, could the Allies in fact reject Wilson's guiding vision, or was it, too, imposed upon them when their economic dependence on the United States at this point in time left them hardly any room for choice?

It has also been argued in favour of the peacemakers that 'many of the ills of Europe' followed 'straight from the war, not from the peace', and therefore the enormous changes which the war had introduced – territorial, economic and social – could neither be controlled nor, still less, could they be arrested.

## 1 The Spectre of Bolshevism

Bolshevism has become a force to be reckoned with. It threatens us through the Red Army, which is to be brought up to a million men in strength, and there are dreams of setting up soviet régimes first throughout the old Russian territories and then in the rest of Europe. This new and monstrous form of imperialism will threaten Europe all the more fearsome as it comes precisely at the end of the war, which will inevitably provoke, in all countries, a serious economic and social crisis . . . . The Allies must therefore cause the soviets to collapse. This will not be achieved by carrying the war to Russia, but rather through economic encirclement of Bolshevism . . . occupation by Allied troops from Romania, Odessa and the rest, of the Crimea and Ukrainian corn belts and the Donets coal-basin, which will be vital pledges for the payment

of the 26,000,000,000 we have lent Russia, and which the  
15 Bolsheviks have repudiated . . . the armies of the Balkans, British  
armies in Turkey will, after the Turks have given in, furnish the  
few divisions needed to establish, around Bolshevism, not only a  
*cordon sanitaire* to isolate it and kill it by starvation, but also the  
20 nuclei of friendly forces around which the healthy elements of  
Russia will be able to organize, and bring about the renovation of  
their country under the aegis of the Entente.

Georges Clemenceau's plan to contain Bolshevism,  
described to Pichon on 23 October 1918. Document  
reproduced in Marc Ferro, *The Great War 1914–1918*, trans.  
Nicole Stone (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973),  
pp. 212–13

### Questions

- ★ a How real, in your opinion, was the threat of Bolshevism to Europe in 1918?
- b 'From October [1918] a clear distinction was being drawn between the struggle against the Central Powers and the struggle against Bolshevism, which hitherto had been lumped together' (Ferro). Discuss this view in the light of the above extract.
- ★ c How wise, do you think, was Clemenceau's appeal for a 'crusade' against Bolshevism? What chances did 'the healthy elements of Russia' (lines 19–20) have in October 1918 of bringing 'about the renovation of their country' (lines 20–21)?
- ★ d To what extent, and in what ways, were Clemenceau's fears justified in the early postwar years?

## 2 Germany in 1918: an English view

*Kriblowitz, December 1918.* . . . I am beginning to comprehend  
that the war with its orgy of death and slaughter has come to an  
end. It is especially hard to realize, because the difficulties of  
every-day life are almost greater now than they were before – or  
5 seem so. The whole economic organization of Germany has  
crumbled away before our eyes, and no new system has as yet  
been formed in its place. The revolution, in fact, came too  
suddenly, even for the Socialists themselves, and what ought to  
have evolved from a natural course of events was prematurely  
10 hurled at us by the unexpected insurrection of the sailors in Kiel  
and Hamburg. Therefore the Socialists have not had time to  
develop a really strong Government, or to test the practical  
working of theories in a country which is still at heart for the  
greater part monarchical in its sympathies.

15 I believe myself that the German people in reality need

something for their imagination – a figure-head that represents in some way the phantastic, the unusual, the ideal. There is no poetry in the figure of a short stout President, with a bald head, a top-hat, and a black coat. . . .

20 Germany's chief danger at the moment is her lack of a central strong Government to negotiate with the Entente, and to take the lead in the land. Instead of one there is a whole series of governments, and no end to the bickerings and jealousies between the different states, which are all aiming at reducing the power of  
25 Berlin. At the moment the proletariat are in possession of power, which they are using to enrich themselves as speedily as possible at the cost of the nation. I hear, if things go on as they are, the State will be bankrupt in a fortnight. . . .

30 The nation at large is economically demoralised and corrupted by the organizations of militarism. . . .

Another problem is what is to become of all the active officers who are being dismissed, and who in civil life have learnt nothing at all? Germany, with no power to expand, and morally blockaded by the rest of the world for years to come, offers but a disconsolate  
35 future for young men, however enterprising they may be. The French ideal, 'l'esclavage allemand', seems the only possible solution, if the Entente insist on the conditions they are proposing.

Little miseries which seemed but pin-pricks a short time ago are gradually gaining in intensity, until they feel almost like poisonous  
40 darts. For years people have been struggling along, supporting as best they could the absence of everything conducive to a decent existence, but now it is almost impossible to bear it any longer. The ancient boots and shoes defy any more mending, the stockings consist of a series of variegated patches, dresses and mantles have  
45 been turned and dyed year after year, and most people's underwear has no recognizable resemblance to the dainty garments of pre-war times. They are of a nameless hue, and look as if they had been fished out of some forgotten patch-bag. As there is no soap, our linen issues from the wash-tub greyer and more hopelessly  
50 torn than we ever dared imagine, and certainly the German woman of to-day is the worst clad in all Europe.

It is a sorry outlook for Christmas, and not even the children will be able to indulge in any of the little luxuries which the 'Weihnachtsmann' usually left at their door.

Evelyn, Princess Blücher, *An English Wife in Berlin: A private memoir of events, politics and daily life in Germany throughout the war and the social revolution of 1918* (London, Constable & Co. Ltd, 1920), pp 302-4

### Questions

- a Explain and comment on (i) 'The whole economic organization . . . in its place.' (lines 5-7); (ii) 'the unexpected insurrection of



the sailors in Kiel and Hamburg' (lines 10–11); (iii) 'to test the practical working of theories' (lines 12–13); (iv) 'the organizations of militarism' (line 30).

- b Do you agree with Blücher that Germany in 1918 was largely 'monarchical in its sympathies' (line 14)? If so, why was the Hohenzollern regime replaced by the Weimar Republic? What chances did Germany have in 1918–19 of going Bolshevik?
- c Suggest what Blücher had in mind when she wrote 'The French ideal . . . proposing.' (lines 35–7).
- d What contribution does the extract from Blücher's *memoir* make to your impression of Germany towards the end of 1918? What other sources would you consult to check the reliability, or otherwise, of her observations?

### 3 Two forms of idealism

#### (a) *Wilson's apocalypse – The Fourteen Points*

1. Open covenants of peace openly arrived at . . .
2. Absolute freedom of navigation . . . alike in peace and in war . . .
3. The removal . . . of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace . . .
- 5 4. . . . national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
5. . . . impartial adjustment of all colonial claims based upon . . .
- 10 the principle that . . . the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the . . . claims of the Government whose title is to be determined.
6. The evacuation of all Russian territory . . . as will secure the . . . co-operation of the other nations . . . for . . . an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing . . .
- 15 7. Belgium . . . must be evacuated and restored without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations . . .
- 20 8. All French territory should be freed, and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine . . . should be righted . . .
- 25 9. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy . . .
10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary . . . should be accorded . . . autonomous development.
11. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated;