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The Coming of the Second World War

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The two world wars are the mountain ranges that dominate the historical landscape of the twentieth century. We still live in their shadows, in America as well as in Europe. Only with these wars did European and American history begin to coincide. The revolutions of 1820, 1830, 1848 and the wars leading to the unification of Italy and Germany marked the nineteenth century in European history, while the major events in American history were the westward movement, the Civil War and mass immigration. These events had certain transatlantic connections, yet not decisive ones. But in the twentieth century the two world wars have been the main events in the history of Europe and America as well.

For Europe World War I may have been more decisive than World War II, which was a radical continuation in many ways of the first war. For the United States World War II was more significant, both in its extent and in its consequences. American participation in World War I was short, and soon after the war American involvement in European affairs was repudiated for at least 20 years by the majority of American people. When Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, many Americans believed that somehow, or in some way, the United States would become involved. President Franklin D. Roosevelt expressed this when he declared U.S. neutrality at the start of the war, but added that he could not ask his fellow countrymen to be neutral in their sentiments.

This was very different from 1914, when the expressions of President Woodrow Wilson and the American people reflected a sometimes smug satisfaction toward the European war: that kind of war was something America had long left behind in its progressive, democratic evolution. It was typical of the Old World, not of the New. During World War I American neutrality was not abandoned until 1917; in World War II the United States was a de facto belligerent many months before Pearl Harbor.

In 1918 President Wilson announced, and tried to put into practice, the idea that this would be the war to end all wars. The history of the next 20 years was to prove him

woefully wrong. It is one of the ironies of history that while for Americans the consequences of World War II were much more worrisome than those of World War I, it may well have been World War II-with all of its unsatisfactory consequences-that brought about the end of the period of world wars.

In general terms, from about 1770 to 1848 the American and the French revolutions characterized a time of great democratic revolutions. Many wars of that period, including the Napoleonic and even the Mexican wars, were merely consequences of those turbulent times. But the broadest wave of European revolutions in 1848-49 turned out to be in reality the end of the era of revolutions. Instead, a series of wars followed in which, for various reasons, Germany played an increasingly important role. (The German people turned out to be better at waging wars than making revolutions.) This period of wars ended in 1945 with the final defeat and division of the German Reich, the division of Europe and the end of the European Age. It also marked the first (and perhaps the last) use of atomic weapons.

II

The start of both world wars involved miscalculations. In 1914 these miscalculations-and the responsibility for declaring the war-were shared by all the European governments and their general staffs, with the possible exception of Belgium. In 1939 the miscalculations that began the war were those of a single leader, Adolf Hitler. As in 1914, these miscalculations involved an incorrect estimate of what a potential adversary would or would not do. Hitler had hoped in 1939 that Britain would not, at the last moment, honor its guarantee to Poland. Remembering 1914, when there had been no clear commitment of British intentions, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain offered a guarantee in 1939 to Poland (the first, and presumably the last, such obligation by the British to an east European state), hoping that such a definite commitment would deter Hitler. It did not. Instead, during the last days of August, Hitler tried to drive a wedge in the alliance between Britain and Poland by offering an ostensibly, but not truthfully, reasonable settlement to his eastern neighbor. He did not succeed. After obvious hesitation Britain declared war on Germany-56 hours after Germany began the bombing and invasion of Poland.

Yet Hitler was not altogether wrong. Although Britain and France declared war, they stopped short of waging war-with the exception of a few tentative incursions over German airspace and a substantial war at sea. They did nothing to aid their Polish ally while the western frontier of Germany was held by only a few German divisions. This reluctant effort, which American journalists dubbed the "phony war," lasted throughout the fall, winter and early spring. It sapped the morale of the French and, to some extent, of the British, and it helped Hitler come close to winning in the early summer of 1940.

A deeper and greater miscalculation, however, eventually cost Hitler the war. In 1939 he had come to believe that time was working against him and in favor of the west European democracies, whose rearmament had begun. He believed that the superiority of the German armed forces would lessen and erode at the latest by 1942 or 1943. His Italian ally, Benito Mussolini, disagreed, arguing that although Britain and France had begun to rearm and resist Germany and Italy, their opposition would not last long. Without actual war, Mussolini wrote, the costly resolve of the west European

democracies would not sustain itself. Their resistance would not stiffen and increase, it would weaken and diminish. In sum, time was not on the side of Paris and London. Mussolini, who repeated this argument once more to Hitler in January 1940, was probably right.

But Hitler would not listen, for deeper reasons welling up from within. His view of his life and destiny had changed. Sometime in the winter of 1937-38 Hitler became convinced that he would not live much longer and that therefore the time had come to translate the prospect of a greater German Reich into action, before it was too late. Thus he moved in 1938 to incorporate Austria into Germany and to subdue Czechoslovakia, and in 1939 he pushed to reduce Poland to a satellite or, at most, to a junior ally of Germany-even at the risk of war.

This last statement requires further explanation. A. J. P. Taylor was the first noteworthy historian in the early 1960s who tried to refute the accepted idea that Hitler had a definite timetable of conquest.1 Hitler, according to Taylor, was a German national leader profiting from situations as they arose. This argument is not altogether untrue, except that there was nothing particularly German about that. Napoleon did not have a timetable of conquest either, a point that Taylor chose to ignore. In any event, Taylor was wrong about Hitler's purposes regarding Poland and about the actual outbreak of the war. Since Hitler's territorial demands in August 1939 were not excessive, Taylor wrote that Danzig was the key problem: "Only Danzig prevented cooperation between Germany and Poland." But this misses the more essential point. Hitler wanted the Polish state to come within Germany's sphere of influence. Concessions on Danzig were to be but the first step along a path that would end with Poland becoming not only Germany's ally and junior partner, but its satellite. He wanted to put an end to a Poland independent enough to have a foreign policy of its own.

Hitler's primary foreign policy requirement was to ensure the vassalage of neighboring countries, rather than the actual annexation of their territories. This was what he gained from both the Austrians and Czechs. But the Poles were different. Their refusal to surrender launched the Second World War. For this Hitler never forgave them. This was probably the main reason-even beyond his racist antagonisms-for his cruel and oppressive treatment of the Polish people, a brutal treatment that would be visited on no other people except the Jews of Europe and Russia.

III

This leads to the larger and unresolved problem of Hitler's policy toward the Soviet Union in 1939. Nine days before Germany's invasion of Poland, his foreign minister, Joachim Ribbentrop, signed in Moscow the German-Soviet nonaggression pact, which included a secret protocol that provided for the division of much of eastern Europe. Hitler thought that this pact, which amounted to a stunning diplomatic defeat for the British and the French, would further deter them from fulfilling their recently assumed obligations to Poland. Instead, on August 25, the British government extended its guarantee to Poland into a formal alliance. Together with Mussolini's decision of Italian nonbelligerence communicated to Berlin that same day, the British decision persuaded Hitler to postpone the commencement of military operations by five days (during which time he tried to drive a wedge between Poland and Britain). Yet nothing indicates that his pact with Stalin was a sine qua non for starting war. Had Hitler made no pact with

Stalin, he still would have attacked Poland.

What would have happened without the German-Soviet pact? Most historians opine that the dominant, if not the consuming, factor in Hitler's worldview was his anticommunism and his vision of Lebensraum, which included portions of European Russia. They argue that the wars against Poland and the western powers were simply a preliminary stage to the ultimate invasion of the Soviet Union. Yet there are some reasons to question this view. There is absolutely no evidence in German military papers or in Hitler's own words to suggest that, after the conquest of Poland, Germany would have continued eastward against the Soviet Union. On the Soviet side, there are many reasons to believe that in September 1939, even without a German-Soviet pact, Stalin would have acted essentially as he did: i.e., seeking some kind of accommodation with the Germans over the crushed body of a Polish state.

This was the essence of Stalin's conduct in September 1938 during the Munich crisis. For a long time people believed (and some historians still believe) that one main reason why the Munich "settlement" was a disaster was because it made Stalin skeptical of the value of an alliance with France and Britain, and that Stalin's doubts eventually led him to seek the accommodation with Hitler. Since the Soviet Union had been allied with France and Czechoslovakia at the time of the Munich conference, many historians maintain that in 1938, unlike 1939, the Soviet Union would have been a military ally of the western democracies. (As the first volume of his wartime memoirs shows, Winston Churchill believed this as late as 1948.) Yet all of the evidence from the diplomatic, military and intelligence documents accumulated since the end of World War II suggests that, the Soviet alliance with Czechoslovakia notwithstanding, Stalin would not have gone to war in 1938 to help the Czechs.

Hitler must have known that. In any event, the strongest evidence against the prevailing notion of Hitler following a timetable is the absence of any mention of Russia in the famous Hossbach memorandum of the conference on November 5, 1937. During this meeting, Hitler told his generals to prepare for war, if need be. Yet he hardly mentioned Russia in his war plans before, or during, the Munich crisis. What he thought about Stalin at that time we do not know. (We do know that during the war Hitler often spoke of Stalin with considerable respect, if not admiration.)

In March and April 1939 it was Moscow that approached Berlin. What happened thereafter was a triangle of negotiations and intrigues. The British and French were trying to bring Russia into their alliance system. Chamberlain would occasionally suggest to the Germans that if they were only more reasonable about Poland, a proper and honest relationship between Britain and Germany could be ensured. Hitler, on the other hand, allowed hints to be dropped to London and Paris about a possible German arrangement with the Soviet Union, which they failed to take seriously until it was too late. Stalin, secretive and cunning by nature, dropped no hints to the British about his approaches to the Germans and few hints to the Germans about his negotiations with the British, which were not going well.

For this failure the dilatory and overly cautious policies of the British and French have often been blamed. They were slow and reluctant to send their missions to Moscow. When they finally did, they consisted of second-rank personages. The British, even more than the French, were unwilling and unable to produce serious military and

political commitments. Yet there is not the slightest evidence that Stalin was willing to enter into any alliance with the western democracies if he could make a deal with Germany instead-which is what happened in the end.

The pact did not start World War II, but it put an end to the political geography of Europe that had been established after World War I. On a larger scale, something else happened. The year 1939 marked the return of Russia and the United States to the European scene after a virtual absence of 20 years.

IV

The English revolutions of the seventeenth century, the American and the French revolutions of the eighteenth century, the Meiji Restoration in Japan in the nineteenth century, to say nothing of Hitler's "national revolution" in 1933, were significant events that enhanced the power of these nations, often through war.

The Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was an exception. It was the consequence of a war and not the source of one; it led to a diminution, not an accretion, of national power. It meant a Russian withdrawal from Europe-geographically, militarily, economically, politically and ideologically. Geographically, the frontier of the "new" Russia retreated eastward (as its capital, too, moved back from Petersburg to Moscow)-in some places it moved back to the Russian frontiers established by Peter the Great and Catherine II nearly two centuries before. Militarily, the dissolution of the Russian army preceded the Bolshevik Revolution-indeed, it was a condition for it; consequently the armed power of Russia was not much of a factor in the European balance of power for about 20 years. Economically, Soviet trade with its European neighbors was minimal, a fragment of what it had been before 1914. Politically, the Soviet Union became a near outcast, separated from the rest of Europe by its own volition. (The term "iron curtain" was not invented by Churchill in 1946. It had been current 25 years earlier, when Lenin's regime chose to close Russia's frontiers as hermetically as possible.) Ideologically, too, the impact of the Soviet Union upon Europe was less than many people then believed (and some people even now believe). It was unlike the American and the French revolutions, which found successful emulators in many places, especially among neighboring peoples. Contrary to Lenin's original predictions, from World War I to World War II communism failed to establish itself anywhere outside the Soviet Union (except Outer Mongolia). It was especially repellent to its east European neighbors.

The change came in 1939. At the threshold of a new European war, Moscow found that it was being solicited. Stalin, who was the opposite of Lenin, that is, a statesman rather than a revolutionary, understood this very well. Russia would reenter eastern Europe and recover some of those territories that Lenin and his cohorts had given up 20 years before. That was Stalin's main goal, not the propagation of international communism-as shown not only by his subsequent actions but also by the language of Soviet declarations of the period.

In this sense the imperial tendency of the Soviet Union, assumed at the end of World War II (and greatly enhanced by its military victories), was already discernible at the beginning of 1939. The western democracies would not be able to defeat, let alone contain, the German Third Reich. By 1940-well before the United States entered the

war-the British recognized that the only alternative to German domination over most of Europe was a hardly avoidable acquiescence to Soviet rule in much of eastern Europe.

In the summer of 1939, however, another factor contributed to the British and French resolution to declare war on Germany. This was the presence-or, rather, the growing shadow-of the United States on the European scene. After the First World War both the Soviet Union and the United States chose to withdraw from Europe. Yet unlike the Soviets', America's withdrawal was only military and political, not economic and cultural. By 1939 a considerable and influential minority of the American people, unlike those in Moscow, evinced a new, anxious and concerned interest in the ominous events in Europe. Even more important was President Roosevelt's conclusion that it was in the American interest to encourage resistance to Hitler in some European capitals, especially in Paris and London. This conclusion had matured in the president's mind during the winter of 1938-39. Mindful of the widespread isolationist currents that still prevailed in the United States, he did not proclaim it openly to the American people. It was nonetheless discernible from his tone in a few presidential statements and in his suggestions to personal envoys in Paris and elsewhere.

Hitler's statements, beginning in January 1939, showed that he was well aware of President Roosevelt's inclinations. From that time on he began to consider Roosevelt as his principal enemy-a conviction that Hitler held to the end. All of this preceded the outbreak of war. In September 1939, unlike in August 1914, American neutrality was not a fixed and seemingly immovable factor. In 1939 and 1940 every European government was aware of the increasing American presence in the constellation of forces and the growing attention and respect paid to the United States as a result. This developed more than two years before the actual American entry into the war.2

V

The reappearance of both Russia and America on the European scene in 1939 foreshadowed the coming of a new world after the war when these two superpowers would govern the destinies of much of Europe and the globe. But in important ways the worlds of 1939 and 1945 were very different. Because of the global rise and the eventual conflict of the two superpowers, it has been customary to consider the conflict between communism and capitalism, incarnated principally by the Soviet Union and the United States, as if that were the spine, the main feature, of the twentieth century since 1917. This perspective has been occasionally presented by Marxist, anti-Marxist, leftist, rightist, Soviet, American, French and German historians. Yet this perspective is false. The outbreak (and also the course) of World War II had nothing to do with communism or with capitalism. In 1939 Soviet and American relations with each other were relatively unimportant.

Erupting in war in September 1939, the world's previous quarter-century was marked by the existence of a triangular conflict among the great powers, but which also tended to be reflected within each country. There was democratic capitalism, incarnated by the United States, Britain, the English-speaking nations and the west and north European democracies. There was communism, incarnated solely by the Soviet Union and represented, indirectly and ineffectively, by the scattering of communist parties and their sympathizers around the world. And there was a new kind of nationalism, elevated to the level of an official state philosophy, a new kind of faith that substituted for

religion, of which the most extreme incarnation was the German Third Reich but which had other incarnations elsewhere. In 1939 this third force was the most powerful one in Europe. Eventually it took the alliance of the other two powers to defeat it. Just as within Germany, Japan, Italy and other countries, neither communism nor democratic capitalism was able to withstand the power of the extreme nationalists, so during the war neither the western democracies nor the Soviet Union was able to defeat Germany alone. It took their strange alliance to accomplish that.

In September 1939 much of this lay in the future. Few people saw it as we see it-or, more precisely, should see it-now. But there was another, related element in the history of that period. The texture of political history had changed. The ideas and the practices that states such as the German Third Reich, the Soviet Union or the liberal democracies represented had active sympathizers abroad. During World War I there were very few people who, because of their ideological preferences, wished for the defeat of their own state and for the triumph of its adversaries. (Even Lenin does not constitute an exception: true, he wished for the collapse of the Tsarist Russian state but then he also wished for the collapse of every other government; while he accepted German help and funds, he was not a German sympathizer.)

By 1939, however, there were people in every European country (and also elsewhere) whose hatred of their governments and of the political system was so intense that they were willing to work for their defeat. Thus not only were communists across the globe committed to helping the Soviet Union; there were nationalists of different stripes who admired the new Germany. Within Germany there were men and women who were willing to risk their lives in order to thwart the triumph of Hitler. The latter were true patriots, rather than nationalists-as indeed the emerging incarnations of resistance to Hitler's Germany in 1940 involved traditionalist patriots such as Churchill or Charles de Gaulle, motivated as they were by their old-fashioned principles of patriotism, liberty and honor.

There was, finally, yet another difference between 1914 and 1939. The peoples of Europe swept into the First World War with frenzied enthusiasm. In September 1939 they went to war in a serious, disciplined way. The British entered the conflict with a silent determination. The Germans, who were supposed to have been whipped into fanaticism by Hitler's propaganda, took up arms with a fatalism that was toneless rather than serene. It stood in grave contrast to their relief when Kaiser Wilhelm II had called them to war in 1914. In 1939 those Europeans who sought relief in the coming of the war were a small minority, the exception. In 1914 it was the majority that had found relief in it, almost everywhere.

In 1914 most governments, and people, expected a short European war. In 1939 no one expected a short war, perhaps with the solitary exception of Hitler. In 1914 the peoples of Europe thought of another European war; only later did popular terminology make it a "World War." In 1939 everyone knew that this was the start of the Second World War. No one knew that it was also to be the last European war.

1 A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, New York: Atheneum Press, 1962.

2 More than a year before Pearl Harbor an American presidential election, for the first

time in history, became an important element in the calculations of the statesmen of the world. That this was obvious in Churchill's case needs no illustration. But Hitler berated Mussolini in October 1940 for attacking Greece before the American presidential election; around the same time Stalin instructed Molotov to visit Berlin only after that election.
