Slouching Towards Utopia?:
An Economic History of the Long Twentieth Century

XII. Understanding World War II

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With the coming of World War II history moves back from broad currents and deep forces assembled out of the deeds and thoughts of hundreds and millions, and back to decisions of smaller numbers and what we have to regard as luck, or chance, or contingency. It is relatively hard to imagine how, after the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the economic history of the global north in the 1920s could have been that different. It is easy to imagine how the Great Depression could have been avoided, or could have been different, but it does not seem surprising that it was much like it was.

As politics and war take center stage starting in 1930, however, things change. History once again becomes one very damned unlikely thing after another:

14.1. Nazi Foreign Policy: Up to Czechoslovakia

While most other countries continued to stagnate in the Great Depression, the German economy recovered rapidly. But peaceful spending-fueled recovery was not what Hitler thought his regime was about. His regime was about German rearmament: the breaking of the shackles of the Treaty of Versailles that restricted the German military to a total strength of 100,000; and eventually aggressive war with the Soviet Union and the other powers to Germany's east with the aim of increasing the “living space” of the German people.

Hitler announced that Germany was rearming, and met with no complaints. The victorious allies of World War I faced a knotty foreign policy problem. The isolationist United States was uninterested in sending soldiers and garrisons to Europe. The British and French electorates definitely did not want to do World War I again. And Hitler's program of rearmament and national self-assertion demanded that Britain and France make a choice.

14.1.1. Hitler's Diplomacy: War by Other Means

The treaties of Muenster and Osnabrueck in 1648—the Peace of Westphalia—and the earlier peace of Augsburg in 1555 established the principle in European international law that internal affairs were nobody else's business. Not all rulers agreed. Pope Leo X condemned the Peace of Westphalia. The French revolutionaries sought the overthrow of kings and oppressors and the creation of sister republics all across Europe—until Napoleon taught them the joys of conquest and empire. (The American republic, by contrast, positioned itself as, in the words of John Quincy Adams: "the friend of liberty everywhere but the guarantor only of our own.") Nevertheless, the idea that it was no concern on one duly recognized government what another did within its borders became one of the strongest taboos of European international law: freedom from nosy oversight was something all governments could agree on.

When you combine this Westphalian sovereignty principle with the particular features of the post-World War I settlement, you brewed an explosive cocktail. World War I ended with a settlement notionally based on the Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson. Most important, there was supposed to be:

- Universal disarmament.
- The abolition of offensive war—international disputes to be settled by arbitration in the League of Nations.
- Adjustment of national borders to correspond to linguistic groupings: people should be ruled from a capital where people spoke the same language that they did.

When Hitler began his diplomatic campaign he thus had a powerful array of arguments on his side. The Versailles Treaty that had ended World War I had restricted the size of the German army to 100,000. But the other nations of the world had never cut back their own armies. Was Germany to be the only great power to fear invasion from Denmark or Yugoslavia? That was not fair. And the response that Nazi Germany was a pariah nation—ruled by a cruel, oppressive dictatorship—was

not a statement that made sense in the language of European diplomacy. Besides, a strong German army could serve as a buffer against communist Russia. (That was, indeed, the argument with which post-World War II West Germany convinced the allies to let it rearm.)

The Versailles Treaty and the other aspects of the post-World War I settlement had tried, imperfectly but as much as was possible, to redraw national borders along linguistic lines. Except for Germany. Linguistic Germans were ruled not just from Berlin but from Rome, from Vienna, from Budapest, from Prague, from Warsaw, from Vilnius, from Paris, by various League of Nations High Commissioners, and even from Bucharest.

14.1.2. The Allies Dither

Thus as long as Hitler restricted his foreign policy goals to (a) removing the restrictions on German armaments that made Germany a less than equal nation, and (b) trying to "settle" national minority problems by redrawing borders to more closely match linguistic lines, it was hard for Britain and France and others to say no.

After all, what did they want to do? Did Britain and France want to invade Germany, depose Hitler, and set up an unstable government bound to be viewed as their puppet in his place, further inflaming German nationalism? Well yes—they did, had they but known what was coming.

But their political leaders did not know the future at the time. In the middle of the Great Depression, French and British political leaders believed that they had bigger problems than enforcing every jot and tittle provision of the Treaty of Versailles, and that they wished to see Germany rejoin the community of western European nations. Since armaments were one of the standards prerogatives of the nation-state, it would be silly in addition to pointless to complain about Germany building its armed forces above the Versailles limits.

Besides, with Germany effectively disarmed there was a power vacuum between the border of the Soviet Union and the Rhine River. Poland and the Soviet Union had fought one war in the early 1920s that had seen the Red Army approach Warsaw before being turned back. Did French and British geopoliticians want to see a possible future Soviet war with Poland end with Communist armies on the Rhine River? Probably not.

In 1936 Hitler broke yet another provision of the Treaty of Versailles: he moved token military forces into the Rhineland, the province of Germany west of the Rhine that had been demilitarized after 1918. Once again it seemed pointless to protest, or to take action. No other European country had demilitarized zones within its borders. To require that Germany maintain a demilitarized zone seemed likely to pointlessly inflame German nationalism. And, once again, to enforce the provision would presumably require an invasion of Germany, the deposition of Hitler, and the installation of a puppet government—for Hitler seemed genuinely popular: there was a substantial risk if not a strong likelihood that new elections would simply return Hitler to power.

14.1.3. The Annexation of Austria

In the spring of 1938 Hitler annexed Austria. Austria was inhabited overwhelmingly by ethnic Germans. One principle of the 1919 peace settlement had been, as much as possible and with a few exceptions, to draw national borders along ethnolinguistic lines so that every language had a nation, and everyone speaking a given language lived in the same nation. In annexing Austria, Hitler declared, he was simply gathering the German people into their one nation: reversing a political error committed in the late nineteenth century when the Austrian Germans were excluded from the political boundaries of Germany, an error that would have been corrected in 1919 save for Allied unwillingness to apply the same national self-determination principles to the Germans that they had applied to themselves and to the rest of Europe.

14.1.4. The Munich Agreement with Britain and France

After the annexation of Austria, Hitler turned his attention to a second of the anomalous boundaries of post-World War I Europe: the "Sudetenland." The northern and western boundaries of Czechoslovakia followed the boundaries of the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia, and included a mountainous region that was the location of all the Czech frontier defenses and was also heavily populated by German-speakers. It took little for Hitler to fund a movement in the Sudetenland that decried oppression and discrimination by Czechs, and that demanded the annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany: the return of German-speakers to the German nation, according to the national self- determination principles of the Treaty of Versailles.

The British government had commitments to defend France; the French governments had commitments to go to war to defend the territorial integrity of Czecho-

slovakia; Czechoslovakia had no desire to surrender its mountain territories—and its frontier defenses. The British and French governments had no desire to get into a war to prevent the people of the Sudetenland from becoming part of Germany. Moreover, they feared the costs of a war. In the words of the novelist Alan Furst, they thought that: "The German bomber force as constituted in a theoretical month —May 1939, for instance—would be able to fly 720 sorties in a single day... 50,000 casualties in a twenty-four hour period. A million casualties every three weeks. And the USSR, Britain, and France were in absolute harmony on one basic assumption: the bomber would always get through. Yes, anti-aircraft fire and fighter planes would take their toll, but simply could not cause sufficient damage to bring the numbers down."

The western democracies' military advisors feared that World War II would bring the horrors of the World War I trench line to civilians located far from the front.

They were right.

In order to avoid war, on September 29 and 30, 1938, at Munich in Germany, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier reached an agreement with Hitler: Hitler would annex the Sudetenland, would pledge to respect the independence of the rest of Czechoslovakia, and Britain and France would guarantee the independence of Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovak representatives were not even allowed in the room where the negotiations took place. Upon his return to Britain, after being applauded by a cheering crowd that saw that general war had been averted, Neville Chamberlain irretrievably blackened his reputation for all time by saying: "My good friends, this is the second time in our history [the first time was 1878] that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street [official residence of the British Prime Ministers] peace with honour. I believe it is peace in our time."

Winston Churchill—out of office, and shunned by the other conservative members of the British House of Commons—had a very different view: better to fight Hitler in 1938 before German rearmament was well advanced and with Czechoslovakia as an ally, than to fight him later when Germany was better-armed and Czechoslovakia was gone.

"You were given the choice between war and dishonour," Churchill told the Prime Minister of his own Conservative Party. "You chose dishonour and you will have war"…

In retrospect Churchill was almost certainly correct. Given what was known about the ruthlessness and violence of the Nazi regime in its own country, it is hard to credit Chamberlain's belief that Hitler could be "appeased" and pacified by the abandonment of the restrictive military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and by being allowed to absorb all regions occupied by ethnic Germans into his state.

14.2. From Munich to Hitler's Turn East

14.2.1. Chamberlain's Reversal

On March 15, 1939, Hitler annexed the remains of Czechoslovakia, after first having sponsored secessionist movement in the "Slovakia" part of the country. Britain and France took no action. Neville Chamberlain stated: "The effect of this declaration [of independence by the Hitler-sponsored secessionist movement] put an end by internal disruption to the state whose frontiers we had proposed to guarantee [at Munich]. His Majesty's government cannot accordingly hold themselves any longer bound by this obligation."

But within two days Chamberlain had reversed himself.

Neville Chamberlain and company extended security guarantees to Poland and Romania: German attacks on Poland or Romania would cause declarations of war against Germany by Britain and France. Chamberlain appeared to believe that this commitment would deter Hitler from further adventures.

But why should it? How could Britain help Poland in a war with Nazi Germany? Hitler concluded that the British and French were bluffing. And he wanted to get himself ready for the main course in his foreign policy: the attack east to do to the Slavic populations of European Russia what the United States had done to the Amerindians, and to turn the Ukraine into a huge breadbasket populated by ethnic German farmers on large, mechanized farms.

In the spring of 1939 Hitler turned his attention to Poland, where the German-Polish border after World War I had been drawn not with attention to the ethno-linguistic principle but to give the newly-created Polish Republic at least one port city, and an outlet to the Baltic Sea. Hitler once again demanded the redrawing of borders—the elimination of the "Polish corridor" between the rest of Germany and the province East Prussia. Had the British and French diplomatic policy makers been flinty- eyed realists, they would have shrugged their shoulders: Hitler wants

to go east? Let him go east. They would have concluded that a Hitler fighting a series of wars to his east was unlikely to cause them trouble for a while at least. And that if Hitler at some point turned west, then would be the time to deal with him.

But they did not do this. They had guaranteed Poland and Roumania.

They doubled down, betting on deterrence. Chamberlain and his Foreign Minister, Lord Halifax, appear to have given very little thought to what would happen if deterrence failed. After all, Hitler must be bluffing too, mustn't he? Nobody wanted a repeat of World War I, right?

14.2.2. The Nazi-Soviet Pact

And it was at this point that Hitler became interested in a—temporary—alliance with Stalin and the Soviet Union.

Stalin throughout the years, even in the years of the "Popular Front" and "collective security," kept putting out feelers to Hitler. Hitler was not interested. Hitler became interested in a deal with Stalin only in 1939, when he recognized how useful Soviet neutrality would be for his conquest of Poland. He and Stalin agreed to split Poland down the middle at the Bug River, and to give the Soviet Union a green light to annex the three Baltic Republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

On Stalin's part, this was the mother of all miscalculations. It allowed Hitler to fight three one-front wars in succession—one against Poland, one against Britain and France, and then one against the Soviet Union. Only by the skin of its teeth did the Soviet Union survive until America entered the war and American armies and air forces made it possible for an Anglo- American force to reenter the main theaters of the war. Much better for Stalin and Russia to have fought Germany in 1939 with powerful British and French allies with armies on the continent than to, as he had to, face Germany's undivided attention in 1941 when no other anti-fascist armies were on the continent of Europe, or would be for two more years.

It is always difficult to understand Stalin, or indeed anything about the Soviet Union. "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," Winston Churchill called it. It is possible, however, to guess at what the thinking inside the Kremlin was:

> *Q: What is Hitler, comrade?*

A: Hitler is a tool of the capitalists, comrade.

Q: Why might Hitler wish to wage an aggressive war against the Soviet Union, comrade?

A: To gain cheap access to our raw materials, comrade, so that his big-business capitalist backers can earn higher profits.

Q: So what happens if we offer him as many of our raw materials as possible at an incredibly cheap price, comrade?

A: Then he will not seek to invade, comrade. He will have no reason to do so.

Q: What will happen then, comrade?

A: What always happens in the highest stage of capitalism, comrade. The big capitalist powers become imperialists, and then they fight terrible wars over markets.

Q: Correct. And after the war is over?

A: We will do what we did at the end of World War I, comrade, we will move in and expand the socialist camp.

Q: Therefore our goal, comrade, is?

A: To appease Hitler by providing him with all the raw materials he wants. And then wait for our moment, comrade.

Stalin did not recognize the danger of even a temporary alliance with Hitler. Perhaps it was because he was—wrongly—anticipating a replay of World War I: trench warfare that would lead to a prolonged stalemate on the Franco-German border, during which another generation of young men would be turned into hamburger, another set of bourgeois countries would exhaust themselves, and another group of countries would become ripe for a Moscow-led Communist revolution.

14.2.3. Hitler Attacks—and Britain and France Man Up

Thus at the start of September 1939 Hitler and Stalin together moved into and partitioned Poland.

And it turned out that Britain and France were not bluffing.

They did carry out their commitments. They did declare war on Germany. Hitler attacked the Poles at dawn on September 1. After some hesitation, the British government demanded at 9 A.M. on September 3 that the German army withdraw from Poland. At 11 A.M. Britain declared war. France followed, But their forces were unready and were far from Poland, which fell to Hitler and Stalin in a month. Thereafter for eight months all was quiet on the western front.

It is conventional to damn Chamberlain and Daladier and the other politicians who ruled Britain and France in the 1930s for their actions, and to damn them in the strongest possible terms. They had not destroyed Hitler when he was weak. They had not prepared their countries to fight Hitler when he was strong. They had not even constructed a grand alliance, calling in the New Worlds to redress the balance of the Old World by enlisting the United States and the Soviet Union in the anti-fascist coalition. (Of course, neither country's decision makers wished to be so enlisted: Roosevelt was hobbled by an isolationist congress, and Stalin was an enigma.)

But there is another point of view. Only one country with a land border with Nazi Germany declared war on it. Everybody else waited until Hitler declared war on them—or, more often, just attacked. That one country was Edouard Daladier's France. Only one other country, albeit one without a land border with Nazi Germany, ever declared war on it. That country was Neville Chamberlain's Britain. Admittedly, they declared war only when they saw no other option and thought (correctly) that their political survival was at stake. And they had no idea how to fight the war that they started. But they were willing to put their countries and their people in harm's way in an attempt to stamp out the greatest tyranny the world has ever seen. Spare a moment for the limited virtue that Edouard Daladier and Neville Chamberlain exhibited: it was more than anybody else.

Their virtue was not rewarded.

14.2.4. France Collapses; Hitler Turns East

In May and June of 1940 France fell in six weeks in 1940. To everyone's surprise, Britain—by then led to Winston Churchill—did not then negotiate a peace but kept fighting, daring Hitler to try an invasion across the English Channel. Hitler did not try.

Instead he turned east. In 1941 Hitler turned on the Soviet Union.

When war came to the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany attacked on June 22, 1941, Stalin's first instinct was to tell his troops not to fire back for fear of "provoking" the Nazis. As a result, his air force was destroyed on the ground in the first day of the war. And the Soviet armies on the border died (or were taken prisoner) where they stood. In 1941 nearly four million Soviet troops were captured.

14.3. Japan in East Asia: The Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere

14.3.1. Japanese Imperialism

Japan had responded to the Great Depression by turning imperialist.

World War I was a powerful stimulus to Japanese industrialization. Although the Japanese government honored its alliance with the British government and declared war on Germany, its military actions during the war were limited to the largely-peaceful takeover of Pacific islands that Germany had claimed as colonies. However, exports from Europe to Asia effectively ceased during World War I. Where were the countries of Asia to purchase the manufactures that they had purchased from Europe? The growing and industrializing Japanese empire was an obvious source. Industrial production and manufactured exports from Japan nearly quadrupled during World War I. Strong demand for Japanese goods provoked inflation: prices more than doubled during the war.

After World War I the European economies once again began to export to Asia, and the newly-expanded Japanese industries faced heavy competition. The Japanese economy in the first half of the 1920s was also badly hit by the disaster of the 1923 Tokyo earthquake, in which between 50,000 and 100,000 people died. But industrialization continued. Manufacturing surpassed agriculture in terms of the share of national product produced in the 1920s.

Japanese manufacturing originally relied—as had manufacturing in other countries—on the unmarried young woman as its typical worker. From the employers' point of view, the main problem with this workforce was its relative lack of experience. So over the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese manufacturers worked to try to balance their short-term labor pool of unmarried females with a longer-term cadre of experienced male workers.

What evolved in Japan's industries was what is now called the "permanent employment system." Male workers were recruited on leaving school, or as apprentices, and promised effective lifetime employment and regular increases in wages in return or loyal service to the company. The company promised wages, medical care, and pension benefits. It is possible that this permanent employment system flourished in Japan because the system fitted Japanese sociology. It is also possible that Japan avoided the deep recessions that would have given manufacturing firms the incentive to fire their permanent workers.

Cotton textiles, furniture manufacturing, apparel, and a relatively small heavy industrial sector were the heart of the Japanese economy by the 1930s, and this modern manufacturing sector was dominated by the zaibatsu: associations of businesses that exchanged executives, cooperated, owned each other's stock, and relied on the same banking and insurance companies for finance. Japan's form of financial capitalism seemed to mimic Germany's to a large degree.

The Great Depression had come to Japan in an attenuated form in 1930. Its exports, especially of silk, fell dramatically. The gold standard applied pressure to deflate the economy. Japan responded by cutting loose from the gold standard, and by expanding government spending—especially military spending. The Great Depression touched but did not stun the Japanese economy. More important, perhaps, the Great Depression revealed that the European imperialist powers were in crisis.

So 1931 saw the Japanese government turn expansionist. The extension of Japanese influence into Manchuria was followed by a Manchurian declaration of "independence" as the Japanese client state of Manchukuo. Expansion was followed by rearmament. Rearmament was followed by a full-scale attack on China in 1937. Government orders for war material and for capital goods to construct infrastructure in Manchuria provided a strong boost to Japanese industrial production at home. From 1937 on Japan turned to a war economy: warships, airplanes, engines, radios, tanks, and machine guns.

14.3.2. Japan's Oil Vulnerability

But in order to continue its war against China, Japan needed oil from either the United States, or from what was to become Indonesia—what was then the Dutch East Indies. Roosevelt was anxious to exert what pressure he could on Japan. And in early 1941 the U.S. embargoed exports of oil to Japan—all oil, not just oil from the United States. It is not clear why. And it is not clear why the U.S. did not immediately go to a "war is imminent" footing in the Pacific. Without imports of oil Japan's military machine could not run: the embargo offered Japan a choice between acquiescing in the U.S.'s demands or starting a war at sea to at the very least seize the oil fields of what is now Indonesia.

Faced with the choice of backing down and abandoning the conquest of China, or seizing the Dutch-held oil fields of the southwestern Pacific and probably becoming embroiled in a war with the United States, the Japanese military elected to strike first. On December 7, 1941 attacks began on British, Dutch, and American forces and possessions in the Pacific. Most famous was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that sank the battleships of the U.S. Pacific fleet. Most damaging was probably the attack on the U.S. airbase of Clark Field in the Philippines, which destroyed the B-17 bomber force that might have blocked Japanese seaborne invasions.

14.4. The Course of the War

World War II in Europe began on September 1, 1939. World War II in Asia had already been ongoing for more than two years. The range of belligerents expanded and contracted. In Europe the war began as France, Britain, and Poland against Nazi Germany. Poland was conquered by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia by the end of September, 1939. Soviet Russia attacked Finland, which fought it to a draw and a peace, in the winter and spring of 1940. The spring of 1940 also saw Germany attack and occupy Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France, with Italy joining in on Germany's side.

By the summer of 1940 only Britain was fighting Nazi Germany.

In late 1940 and early 1941 Britain acquired Greece and Yugoslavia as allies. But they were conquered by Nazi Germany by the spring of 1941. In the summer of 1941 Nazi Germany attacked Soviet Russia. And on December 7, 1941, the Japanese navy bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and attacked a wide range of U.S., British, and Dutch territories in the Pacific. Nazi Germany declared war on the

U.S. a day later. (But, curiously enough, Japan remained at peace with Soviet Russia.) And the war was truly global.

World War II was a "total" war. At its peak, some 40 percent of U.S. GDP was devoted to the war. Some 60 percent of British GDP was devoted to the war. Some 50 million—plus or minus 10 million—people died in, during, and as a result of war.

14.4.1. Tactics and Operations

How are we to understand World War II?

One way is to take a look at the first three major campaigns—the Polish campaign of September 1939, the French campaign of May-June 1940, and the first six months of the Russian campaign from June 22 to the end of 1941.

In the 1939 Polish campaign, the Nazis lost 40,000 soldiers killed and wounded. The Poles lost 200,000 killed and wounded. The Poles also lost about 1,000,000 taken prisoner.

In the 1940 French campaign, the Nazis lost 160,000 soldiers killed and wounded. The allies lost 360,000 soldiers killed and wounded. And the allies also lost 2,000,000 soldiers taken prisoner.

In the first six months of the 1941 Russian campaign, the Nazis lost 1,000,000 soldiers killed and wounded. The Russians lost 4,000,000 soldiers killed and wounded. And the Russians lost 4,000,000 soldiers taken prisoner.

The Nazis were simply better, tactically, at the business of war then any of their enemies. They understood dive bombers, they understood tank columns, they understood surprise and flank attacks and digging in. The interwar German army on which the Nazis built had been one of only 100,000 soldiers. But those 100,000 had learned and developed their business to a terrifying degree of tactical superiority over their enemies. That is the first lesson of World War II: Fight the Nazis, and expect to be tactically outclassed. Expect to lose between two and five times as many soldiers on the battlefield as the Nazi armies do. That is true for everyone at the start of the war, and still true remarkably late—even though the allies did learn.

Moreover, the Nazis' opponents were operationally outclassed as well. That is the second lesson of World War II: Fight the Nazis, and expect periodically to find large groups of your soldiers overwhelmed, surrounded, cut off, out of supply, flee-

ing in panic and forced to surrender in large numbers. The last such episode took place in December 1944, less than five months before the collapse of the Nazi regime: the Nazi Fifth Panzer Army surrounded and forced the surrender of nearly the entire U.S. 106th Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel of the Ardennes.

How did this happen? Well, take a look at the French campaign of 1940. The French are expecting the Nazis to attack through Belgium north of the Ardennes Forest. Instead, the Nazis make their main attack through the Ardennes Forest, against the weak French Ninth Army—weak because the French command thought that the forest, the poor road network, and the Meuse River line would be sufficient additional defenses.

Three days into the battle it was clear that a major Nazi attack was coming through the Ardennes, and the French began to respond. According to Ernest May's *Strange Victory*:

> At 3 P.M. on May 12 [General] Huntziger signaled La Ferte that he wanted strong reinforcements to repel a prospective German attack.... Three of the strongest elements in the general reserve proceed[ed] immediately to join Huntziger's Second Army: the Third Armored, Third Motorized, and Fourteenth Infantry divisions.... The infantry division was a crack unit commanded by... General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny... (p. 410)

By May 15, these three divisions had been further reinforced: The French First Armored division had been switched from the Belgian plain to the Ninth Army sector to its south, infantry formations had been ordered to assemble behind the Ninth Army to form a new Sixth Army, and the Second Armored division had been ordered to assemble behind Ninth Army as well. Charles de Gaulle was placed in command of the newly-formed Fourth Armored division, and ordered to attack the southern flank of the incipient Nazi German breakthrough.

So what happened to all these forces—four heavy armored divisions with perhaps 800 tanks between them, plus a large chunk of the sixteen infantry divisions that were in the French strategic reserve on May 10? They had as many tanks as the seven Nazi panzer divisions that were in the Nazi main thrust.

- The French First Armored division simply ran out of gas. While it was waiting for the fuel trucks to come up to refuel it, Rommel's Seventh Panzer Division came down the road. It was attacked and destroyed as a fighting unit while out of fuel. (Curiosity: the czar of fuel for First Army--from which the armored division had come--was medieval historian Marc Bloch.)

- The French Second Armored Division—well, according to William L. Shirer's The Collapse of the Third Republic: "Orders for the [Second Armored] Division to move... did not come until noon of May 13.... The trains with the tanks and artillery were not able to start until the afternon of the 14th.... The wheeled vehicles with the supplies ran into the panzers racing west from Sedan and, having no combat elements, withdrew south of the Aisne.... The tanks and tracked artillery were finally unloaded from their flatcars... between Saint-Quentin and Hirson.... The division was hopelessly dispersed over a large triangle between Hirson, La Fere on the Oise, and Rethel on the Aisne..." It was ineffective because its assembly areas had been overrun by the Nazis before it could even begin to fight.

- General Huntziger ordered the French Third Armored division to retreat to the south: he thought its principal task should be to guard the left flank of the Maginot Line against a flanking attack should the Nazis turn south after crossing the Meuse.

- The infantry formations of the French Sixth Army were, like the French Second Armored Division, overrun by Reinhardt's Sixth Panzer Division on May 15 and 16 while they were trying to coalesce in their assembly areas.

- Only de Gaulle's Fourth Armored Division made its weight felt on the battlefield at all: By May 16, as William Shirer puts it (p. 689): "The three heavy [armored divisions] the French had, all of which in May 10 had been stationed... within 50 miles of the Meuse at Sedan and Mezieres, which they could have reached by road overnight, had thus been squandered.... Not one had been properly deployed.... By now, May 16, they no longer counted. There remained only the newly formed 4th [armored division], commanded by de Gaulle, which was below strength and without divisional training…"

The French failed in tactics—the comparative battlefield casualties make that clear. The French failed in strategy—opposing the main Nazi attack with the weak Ninth Army while leaving the stronger formations to the north vulnerable to encirclement. And the French failed in operations too. The French threw 800 tanks in four armored divisions plus between six and ten infantry divisions in front of the Nazi breakthrough in plenty of time to make a difference. But (de Gaulle's division aside) these forces were completely ineffective in a running fight against seven Nazi panzer divisions, even though they had no more tanks and somewhat fewer soldiers than the French reserves committed to oppose them.

Winston Churchill had kissed hands and taken over as First Lord of the Treasury on May 10, 1940. Five days later he received a phone call from the French Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud: "We have been defeated. We are beaten. We have lost the battle. The road to Paris is open. We are defeated."

On the sixteenth Churchill crossed the English Channel:

> We... reached [Paris airport] in little more than an hour. From the moment we got out of the "Flamingo" it was obvious that the situation was incomparably worse than we had imagined…. Germans were expected in Paris in a few days at most.... North and south of Sedan, on a front of fifty or sixty miles, the Germans had broken through. The French army in front of them was destroyed or scattered. A heavy onrush of armoured vehicles was advancing with unheard-of speed.... Behind the armour, he said, eight or ten German divisions, all motorized, were driving onwards, making flanks for themselves as they advanced against the two disconnected French armies on either side.... When he stopped... I then asked: "Where is the strategic reserve?" and, breaking into French, which I used indifferently (in every sense): "Ou est las masse de manoeuvre?" General Gamelin turned to me and, with a shake of the head and a shrug, said: "Aucune."…
>
> Outside in the garden... clouds of smoke arose of large bonfires…. NO STRATEGIC RESERVE. "Aucune." I was dumbfounded. What were we to think of the great French Army and its highest chiefs?... One can have, one must always have, a mass of divisions which marches up in vehement counter-attack at the moment when the first fury of the offensive has spent its force.... I admit this was one of the greatest surprises I have had in my life…. Presently I asked General Gamelin when and where he proposed to attack…. His reply was "Inferiority of numbers, inferiority of equipment, inferiority of method"—and then a hopeless shrug of the shoulders…

Churchill was wrong: the French had possessed a strategic reserve. They had committed it. But only two divisions of it—de Gaulle's, and de Lattre de Tassigny's—had been at all effective. The rest were bewildered, unable to respond to swift moving events, and had been scattered.

Before we scorn the French army of 1940 as cheese-eating surrender monkeys, remember what happened to the U.S. 106th Infantry Division when Hitler's Third Reich was on its very last legs. The same had happened to Major General Lloyd Fredendall's U.S. II Corps at Kasserine Pass in the U.S. Army's first encounter with the Nazi Army on the attack. Everybody—the Poles, the Dutch, the Belgians, the French, the Yugoslavs, the Greeks, the British, the Americans, and the Rus-

sians—who faced the Nazis did more-or-less equally badly tactically and operationally, at least in their initial encounters.

14.4.2. Strategy

The tactical and operational superiority of the Nazi armies was a powerful force multiplier. Fortunately for the world and for the allies, it was offset by equally large strategic deficits. Take a look at the high-water mark of Nazi conquest in Europe in November 1942: The Nazis have thirteen of their armies in Russia. Eight are spread out in a line extending from Leningrad on the Baltic Sea southeast to the city of Voronezh. Then comes a gap. Then come two armies where the Don and Volga Rivers nearly touch: that is where the city then called Stalingrad is. Then there are three more armies much further to the southeast, in the Caucasus Mountains.

The first question that strikes anyone is this: why are those five armies in the southeast so far extended? What are they doing? The answer for the three southernmost is that they are trying to conquer the Caucasus oil fields. Hitler and his staff were convinced that Nazi Germany could not continue the war unless the conquer more oil fields than simply the Roumanian ones around Ploesti.

As it happens, they were wrong—their subordinates were lying to them about how much fuel they had and how much they were using (one of the defects of command-and-control central planning). But Hitler was convinced that everything must be risked to conquer the oil fields.

The two dots armies where the Don and Volga Rivers come near, north guarding the left flank of the three armies committed to the Caucasus, are the Nazi Sixth and Fourth Panzer Armies. They are both trying to capture the bombed-out rubble that had been the city of Stalingrad.

It's unclear why—other than that the city was named after Soviet Russian dictator Josef Stalin, that is.

Capture of Stalingrad and the Volga River banks on which it sat would not provide better flank protection for the armies further south than a position back at Kalach on the River Don. And the Sixth and Fourth Panzer Armies ought to have been worrying much more about their own flank—the long gap between them and the Nazi German Second Army to their west-northwest that was covered only by east-

ern European allied troops, with a low standard of equipment and an even lower standard of morale.

The Soviet Russians attempted two great winter offensives in the winter of 1942-1943. Operation Mars was directed against the center of the Nazi line, near Moscow: it was a failure with heavy casualties. Operation Uranus was directed against the long exposed Nazi flanks near Stalingrad: it was a total success, surrounding and capturing the entire Nazi German Sixth Army (and large chunks of the Fourth Panzer Army as well) and forcing a precipitous withdrawal of the Nazi forces further south away from the oil fields and back toward Germany. It was an extraordinary victory—and one made possible only by the extraordinary strategic lapses that had created Nazi eastern front dispositions as they stood in late 1942.

14.4.3. Attrition

In the long run, these strategic lapses were not something the Nazi regime could afford. Consider the time series of the number of German troops killed or missing month-by-month from the start of 1941 to the end of 1944. From the start of Russian theater operations in June 1941 on, with occasional pauses, the Nazis lose about 50,000 German soldiers killed and missing every month. Nazi Germany has an ethnic German population of perhaps 60 million, with perhaps 15 million men of potential military age. Half of those can be mobilized—no more unless the Nazis were willing to go against their ideology and mobilize women for war work on a large scale, which they were not. With a maximum potential army strength of only 7.5 million, losing a steady 50,000 killed and captured each month is a heavy drain.

Then comes a spike in December-January-February 1943: 250,000 which is the surrender of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Then comes the smaller spike in late spring, which is the surrender of the Nazi army group in Tunisia. A year later sees the million-soldier spike which is the collapse and surrender of the Nazi Army Group Center under the impact of Soviet Russia's Operation Bagration in the summer of 1944.

Better Nazi strategy that did not undermine their tactical and operational edge would have prolonged the war. Perhaps it would have won it: a Nazi Germany that chose its enemies and fought until they were defeated might have been a much more dangerous and evil thing than a Nazi Germany that attacks Soviet Russia while still fighting a war with Britain, and that then declares war on the United States on December 8, 1941 just because.

14.4.4. Logistics

But probably not. Even the best strategy coupled with its operational and tactical advantages would have been unlikely to have won World War II for the Nazis. The logistical and productivity differentials were just too great.

Set war production of the U.S. in 1944 equal to 100. In 1940 Britain's production is 7 and Nazi Germany and Japan's production is 11. In 1942 all the allies together are producing 92, and Germany and Japan are producing 16. and by 1944 it is 150 to 24.

From 1942 on, once the war had become a truly global war, Hitler's defeat was nearly inevitable. Even Britain alone was matching Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe in war production. Throw in the United States and the Soviet Union, and Nazi Germany was outproduced more than eight to one; Nazi Germany and Japan together were outproduced more than six to one.

A three-to-one tactical-operational advantage in casualties does not help when you are outnumbered in tanks and aircraft by eight to one, and outnumbered in potential military manpower by ten to one. Starting in the fall of 1942 a large number of important battles go against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan: Midway northwest of Hawaii, Guadalcanal on the way from the U.S. to Australia, El Alamein in Egypt, ONS5/SC30 in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and most of all Stalingrad and Operation Uranus. By their end it is very clear who will win the war if they want to keep fighting. It was not, said Churchill, the end. It was not even, said Churchill, the beginning of the end. But it was the end of the beginning.

U.S., British, and Russian armies met in the rubble that had been Germany in the spring of 1945; Adolf Hitler committed suicide as the Russian armies closed in on his Berlin command post; Japan, atom-bombed, firebombed, blockaded, and threatened with invasion, surrendered in the summer of 1945.

14.4.5. Science

And even had the United Nations not proven victorious on the battlefield, there was the Manhattan Project and the A-bomb. Germany when Hitler took power had the best atomic physicists in the world. But what they did was dismissed as "Jewish science", and the lucky were able to flee into exile.

The Nazis had no atom bombs, and no ability to figure out how to build any. Starting in August 1945 the U.S. had the power to turn cities, starting at 2 for the first month, into radioactive wastelands. And the U.S. would have used that power until unconditional surrender was offered.

14.5. Death and Destruction

When World War II ended, perhaps 40 million in Europe (and perhaps 10 million in Asia) were dead by violence or starvation. More than half of the dead were inhabitants of the Soviet Union. But even west of the post- World War II Soviet border, perhaps one in twenty were killed—close to one in twelve in Central Europe. In World War I the overwhelming proportion of those killed had been soldiers. During World War II well under half of those killed were soldiers:

- European Jews: 6M (70%) (1/3 of them Poles)
- Poland: 6M (16%) (1/3 of them Jews)
- Soviet Union: 26M (13%)
- Germany: 8M (10%)
- Japan: 2.7M (4%)
- China: 10M (2%)
- France: 600K (1%)
- Italy: 500K (1%)
- Britain: 400K (1%)
- United States: 400K (0.3%)

Material damage in World War II was spread over a wider area than in World War I. Destruction in the First World War was by and large confined to a narrow belt around a static trenchline. Although material destruction along the trenchline was overwhelming, it extended over only a small proportion of the European continent. World War II's battle sites were scattered more widely. Weapons were a generation more advanced and more destructive. World War II also saw the first large-scale strategic bombing campaigns. The aftermath of World War II saw many of Western Europe's people dead, its capital stock damaged, and the web of market relationships torn. Relief alone called for much more substantial government expenditures than reduced tax bases could finance. The post- World War I cycle of hyperinflation and depression seemed poised to repeat itself. Prices rose in Italy to 35 times their prewar level. France knocked four zeroes off the franc.

14.6. What If?

Had World War II gone otherwise, we would live in a very different world.

Had Franklin D. Roosevelt decided in the spring of 1941 that with Europe ablaze it was unwise for the U.S. to try to use an economic embargo of militarily-necessary oil to pressure Japan to withdraw from China, 1945 would probably have seen the U.S. and Japan at peace, the coastal provinces of China Japanese-occupied colonies, the interior of China an anarchy, and the prestige of the Japanese military that had established this co-prosperity sphere greatly heightened.

Had the British and French governments been willing to use force to remove Hitler when he occupied the Rhineland in 1936, or threatened Czechoslovakia in 1938, there would have been no World War II in Europe. Had Stalin allied with Britain and France and declared war on Nazi Germany when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, in all probability Hitler would have been crushed and World War II in Europe ended by the end of 1941.

Had anyone other than Winston Churchill become British Prime Minister in 1940—had Neville Chamberlain remained, or had Lord Halifax assumed the post—then the British government would almost surely have negotiated a separate peace with Nazi Germany in 1940. When Nazi Germany attacked Soviet Russia in 1941, it would have done so with its full strength. Stalin's regime might well have collapsed, and European Russia up to the Urals (and perhaps beyond) could have become Nazi German territories, colonies, or puppet states.

It is not likely that Hitler would have refrained from attacking Russia in any possible universe. The need to do so was buried too deeply in his world view to be denied.

Last, what if Hitler had not declared war on the United States in 1941? Would Roosevelt have been able to get congress to declare war on Nazi Germany on the grounds that all the Axis powers were allied, or would congress have insisted on concentrating on fighting Japan first? If the second, then would Britain and Russia have been able to defeat Germany by themselves, or would 1945 have seen the United States dominant in the Pacific and Nazi Germany dominant in Europe?

We do not know.

We do know that most of the alternative ways that World War II might have gone would trade a postwar period with a Communist evil empire centered in Moscow and dominant over eastern Europe for a postwar period with a Nazi evil empire centered in Berlin and dominant over all Europe, or perhaps Eurasia. Not an improvement.

We are very lucky that World War II was not even worse for humanity than it was.