The Cost of Geography: Europe's International History Between the Wars, 1918–1939

DAVID REYNOLDS

Robert Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 611 pp., £25 (hb), ISBN 9780230574786.

Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 229 pp., £55 (hb), ISBN 9780754669647.

Joe Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: The Arms Race and the Second World War, 1931–1941* (London: John Murray, 2010), 460pp. £30 (hb), ISBN 9780719565199.

Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 324pp, £35 (hb), ISBN 9780199297535.

Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1919–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1,222pp., £35 (hb), ISBN 9780199212002.

Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 450pp., £18.99 (hb), ISBN 97801999233205.

'Geography costs – why does the map of Europe never stay put?' The American poet Carl Sandburg posed that question in 1940 as the European continent was engulfed by another great conflict, the second in a generation. The course and conduct of the two world wars continue to dominate publishers' lists but several recent volumes offer stimulating interpretations of Europe's international history during the intervening twenty years. They shed a sobering light on the cost of geography and on the challenges of statecraft, because what moved the map were not only the tectonic forces of socio-economic change but also the decision-making of political leaders.[1]

It is often said that the Paris peace conference of 1919 redrew the map of Europe. In fact, the cartographic revolution was already clear in outline by the time the First World War ended. The challenges faced by the peacemakers are explored in a new

University of Cambridge, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 3BU, England; djr17@cam.ac.uk

[1] 'Turn of the Wheel', in Carl Sandburg, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), 645.

Contemporary European History, **21**, 2 (2012), pp. 273–286 © Cambridge University Press 2012
doi:10.1017/S096077731200015X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

thirty-two-volume series, *Makers of the Modern World*, published by Haus and edited by Alan Sharp. Apart from his book on the consequences of the settlement and Ruth Henig's study of the League of Nations, the series comprises short political biographies of the statesmen who made peace at Paris with reflections on the legacy of 1919 for their countries. The volumes are of varying value, because some of the statesmen played little part in shaping the peace, let alone in making the modern world. Some authors do not successfully resolve the tension between focusing on the man and on his country. The most useful volumes are probably those on eastern Europe, whose complex history is often treated in broad-brush terms by English-language writers, for instance the assured study of Aleksandŭr Stamboliĭski of Bulgaria by Richard Crampton, and Charlotte Alston's incisive examination of the three Baltic states. The series as a whole is a commendably ambitious venture and its best volumes should prove valuable for student teaching.[2]

Central to Europe's instability after 1918 were two fundamental issues that the peacemakers could not resolve: Germany refused to accept the legacies of defeat and eastern Europe could not come to terms with its new political geography. The books under review cast light on each of these issues. The 'myth of the front experience' has been central to interpretations of post-war German politics. Supposedly the soldiers serving in the trenches returned home 'brutalised' by the relentless violence and embittered at the leftists and pacifists by whom they had supposedly been 'stabbed in the back' in 1918. These theses were developed by scholars working primarily from textual sources – letters and memoirs by student volunteers and other articulate veterans together with best-selling books such as Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*. Recent scholarship has moved beyond this rather limited selection of textual material to explore the social history of Weimar politics through specific groups of veterans and workers. This work has offered a more nuanced picture, emphasising that many veterans managed to adjust to life in a defeated, democratic Germany and, especially in the case of Social Democrats, also explicitly repudiated violence as a political weapon.[3]

Yet the most important text of the German war experience has until recently escaped close scrutiny as social history. In Volume 1 of *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler roots his whole political mission in the searing events of 1914–18. Extolling the courage of 'this unique army' whose grey steel helmets stood 'unwavering and unflinching, an immortal monument', he denounces the press and politicians, the strikers and pacifists, above all the Marxists and the Jews who, he claimed, undermined the war effort from within. His fury at these 'vermin' reaches its peak in November 1918

[2] *Makers of the Modern World: The Peace Conferences of 1919–1923 and their Aftermath*, series editor Alan Sharp (32 vols, London: Haus Publishing, 2008–10).

[3] See George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. Ch. 8; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Germany after the First World War – A Violent Society? Results and Implications of Recent Research on Weimar Germany', *Journal of Modern European History*, 1, 1 (2003), 80–6. This essay was part of the inaugural issue of the *Journal* devoted to 'Violence and Society after the First World War' which contained wide-ranging discussions of this theme across Europe as a whole.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

when, blinded by a British gas attack and hospitalised in Pomerania, he hears the incredible news of capitulation and revolution. In perhaps the most purple passage of this turgid book, Hitler describes how he threw himself on his bunk, weeping for the first time since his mother's death: 'And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations . . . in vain the deaths of two millions . . . Did all this happen only so that a gang of wretched criminals could lay hands on the fatherland?' The chapter ends pregnantly: 'I, for my part, decided to go into politics'.[4]

This story lies at the heart of much Hitler biography, yet it has rarely been seriously analysed. Thomas Weber's detailed account of *Hitler's First War* is therefore a valuable contribution to scholarship because he painstakingly reconstructs the story of the man and his unit, the sixteenth Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, named for its first commander Julius von List. According to Weber, Hitler was on the western front for forty-two out of the war's fifty-one months, yet almost all of that time he was not a front-line fighter but served instead as a dispatch runner attached to regimental headquarters – a point never mentioned in *Mein Kampf*. The main job of regimental runners was to take messages to and from battalion headquarters; battalion runners would communicate with the front. This was still hazardous work and Weber does not question Hitler's frequent acts of bravery, but the main danger came from artillery shells rather than rifles and machine-guns at the front. Hitler lived in relative comfort at regimental HQ several kilometres behind the lines among what resentful trench soldiers called the 'rear area pigs' (*Etappenschweine*). Indeed his two awards for gallantry are largely attributed by Weber to the fact that regimental officers were more aware of the bravery of dispatch runners than that of trench fighters. Hitler was also lucky in October 1916 that a thigh wound spared him a torrid week on the Somme when his regiment was decimated by British shellfire. And his blindness two years later is attributed by Weber, following the work of Gerhard Köpf, not to British mustard gas but to shellshock – hardly surprising given the length and intensity of Hitler's war service but not the sort of thing to mention in *Mein Kampf*.

Weber also tries to reconstruct the mentality of Hitler's regiment as a whole, questioning the myth of a unified front experience. Contrary to the image of fiery German nationalism, there was a good deal of anti-Prussian feeling among these Bavarians. Nor does Weber detect a strong sense of *Kameradschaft* across the whole regiment: the most powerful ties were, as usual in army units, among smaller 'primary groups'. Above all, these men did not return home brutalised and radicalised by their front experience: the majority supported the new Weimar Republic, though they found the radical Right less distasteful after the excesses of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic. Most striking, Weber shows that Hitler was a minor office-holder in that Soviet Republic, openly serving 'a government that he was later to deride as treacherous, criminal and Jewish in *Mein Kampf*'. Here is further evidence that Hitler ended the war confused rather than certain about his political beliefs. The real ideological turning point came after his failed putsch: *Mein Kampf*, declares Weber, 'is in many ways Hitler's *Bildungsroman*' in which he invented himself and legitimised

[4] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 152, 186–7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

his racist ideology in a fictive front experience that supposedly prefigured the Nazis' classless *Volksgemeinschaft*.[5]

One army regiment does not make a war generation, especially a regiment from a conservative Catholic heartland with its own local patriotism. But Weber's account shows the value of specific case studies of war veterans to explore the 'brutalisation' thesis. On a larger canvas he goes on to contest the old *Sonderweg* thesis of Germany's flawed path to modernity: in the 1920s these Bavarian veterans were coming to terms with democracy. For Weber the turning point comes in the early 1930s, when the magnitude of the Depression played into the hands of the radical Right, of whom Hitler proved the most effective operator. Rather than exploiting autocratic flaws in German society, Weber argues, Hitler embarked on 'de-democratisation' to reverse the real achievements of the 1920s. By the end of his book Weber is building a lot on one case study, skating over the deep structural problems of the Weimar Republic, but his argument is provocative and important. It also parallels the conclusions of other studies of veterans.[6]

Once Hitler gained power his foreign policy concentrated on the new states that appeared (or reappeared) on the map of Europe after the collapse of the Romanov and Hapsburg empires in 1917–18. These are the 'Bloodlands' – Timothy Snyder's headline-grabbing title for his account of how eastern Europe became a killing ground for at least fourteen million people between 1933 and 1945. Snyder draws together the stories of Stalin's great famine and great terror, German starvation of Soviet prisoners of war, the savagery of both sides against the Poles, and the Nazis' systematic campaign to exterminate the Jews. Snyder's controversial work is reviewed elsewhere in this issue.[7] Suffice it here to say that he concentrates on the dictators themselves and the policies they adopted: 'The victims' homelands lay between Berlin and Moscow; they became the bloodlands after the rise of Hitler and Stalin'.[8] The victims were essentially people who had the misfortune to be in the wrong place on the map of Europe at the wrong time – in fact during one of the worst epochs in its history. Snyder details their victimisation through a mix of numbing statistics and poignant stories but he offers little explanation of their background and predicament or of the role they played in their own fate.

This is where Alexander Prusin's monograph makes a useful contribution. For Prusin, as for Snyder, these are the 'lands between' the Germans and the Russians – geopolitically cursed – but he relates the overarching power struggle more closely

[5] Weber, *Hitler's First War*, 250, 269.

[6] For similar arguments about veterans from rural Bavaria see Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 274–5. Also more generally Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds, *Krieg im Frieden: Die umkämpfte Erinnerung an den Ersten Weltkrieg 1918–1935* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1997) and the still valuable study by Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), esp. Ch. 9.

[7] See p. 115 in this issue.

[8] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), quoting xix. Also described as 'shatter zones' in recent literature – see Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman, 'Introduction: Aftershocks: Violence in Dissolving Empires after the First World War', *Contemporary European History*, 19, 3 (2010), 183 n. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the ethno-cultural diversity of the borderlands themselves. Prusin argues that although this diversity was a source of regional conflict, the problem was not crudely the 'awakening of nationalism' in the old empires but the 'nationalising policies' of the states in power after 1914. 'Historically, collective identities in the borderlands were based on the commonality of language, religion, culture, and ethnicity, or in other words on ethno-communal rather than national associations'.[9] This was not a great problem in an era of European peace, the Habsburgs being particularly relaxed about multiple identities as long their subjects remained loyal to the Emperor. The Tsarist regime was much more repressive but apart from the Polish uprisings and the massive pogroms after the 1905 revolution the borderlands remained largely violence-free before 1914.

For Prusin, the nationalising state was the main instigator of twentieth-century violence, a process that began in 1914 rather than during the era of Hitler and Stalin. In the fevered atmosphere of war ethno-communal diversity was seen as a threat to political stability: first the Tsarist regime and then the advancing Central Powers cracked down on suspect minorities, which only served to encourage their self-identification as distinct national groups. The collapse of Russian and German power in the region in 1917–18 then provided a unique opportunity for nationalist politicians to forge new states, though it was only after bloody wars that the Soviet Union finally recognised Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In the post-imperial era the borderlands became an area of chronic instability, for two essential reasons that Prusin underlines. First, the actual borders had been decided by force of arms, and most of the losers from 1918 considered them only temporary. This was especially true of the two biggest revisionist powers, Germany and Russia: Poland had been recreated largely at their expense and its repartition in the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939 began the next round in this struggle. A second source of instability was the ethnic diversity of the successor states and the nationalising policy of most of their governments. Following the Tsarist model, these regimes promoted the interests of the core nation and discriminated against the civil and political rights of minorities: hence the 'Polonisation' of Ukrainian areas of Poland and the 'Romanisation' of Bessarabia and Bukovina; likewise the increasingly harsh treatment by the Czechoslovak state of the previously dominant Germans. As Foreign Minister Eduard Beneš told a British diplomat in 1930: 'Before the war, the Germans were here' – he pointed to the ceiling – 'and we were there', pointing to the floor. 'Now', he went on reversing the gestures, 'we are here and they are there'.[10]

On Prusin's account the ravages of Hitler and Stalin in the borderlands during the Second World War were therefore an extension, albeit on a massive and grotesque scale, of the nationalising policies practised since 1914. Stalin tried to Russify his territories in 1939–41 – imposing the Russian language, implementing collectivisation

[9] Prusin, *Lands Between*, 4. For the argument that this also remained a theme after 1914 and indeed for much of the twentieth century, see the stimulating essay by Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 69, 1 (2010), 93–119.

[10] Quoted in Mark Cornwall, '"National Reparation"?: The Czech Land Reform and the Sudeten Germans, 1918–38', *Slavonic and East European Review,* 75, 2 (1997), 280.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and deporting or liquidating ethnic elites. He resumed the same process after 1944 at huge human and material cost, notably the dreadful famine in the Ukraine in 1946. Between 1941 and 1944 the Nazi occupiers were more interested in Germanising the lands than in Germanising the population, so human beings suffered less than under Russian rule – with the conspicuous exceptions of Communists, partisans and above all the Jews. In this whole bloody saga of mass murder Prusin stresses that local ethnic groups were often willing accomplices: 'many Lithuanian, Polish, or Ukrainian "neighbours" consciously synchronised anti-Jewish violence with the policies of the occupied forces'.[11] The Russo–German war was an opportunity to resolve old border issues, as in the 'low intensity' armed conflict between Poles and Lithuanians to control Vilnius in 1944 and the renewed bid by the Ukrainians to create an independent state, which cost 60,000 lives and led to the exodus of some 350,000 Poles. After 1945 it was the Poles and the Czechs who drove out the Germans, establishing their countries as much more ethnically coherent states than during the inter-war era.

So, complementing Snyder's dramatic overview of the bloodlands which concentrates on the dictators, Prusin traces the historical interactions of ethnicity and state-building. Yet he does not see post-1918 eastern Europe as irrevocably doomed from the start. Despite the structural problems of the successor states – their disputed borders and fractious minorities – by the late 1920s their economies seemed relatively stable. But then these largely agrarian societies were devastated by economic collapse, especially the catastrophic fall in agricultural prices: 'The Great Depression laid bare not only the fragility of the eastern European economies, but also the vulnerability of the entire post-First World War order in the region'. As in Germany, the Depression was when authoritarian rule really took hold, when the problems of the post-1918 settlement became critical.[12]

The Depression era is absolutely central to Robert Boyce's study *The Great Interwar Crisis* – a vigorous, at times polemical, reinterpretation of the 1920s and 1930s. Boyce argues that the wars of 1914–18 and 1939–45 constituted radical breakdowns of the international political system but not of the international economy. By contrast, he goes on, 'midway through the interwar period the international economic system *and* the international political system simultaneously broke down. It was a unique moment and comparable in importance to the world wars themselves'. These assertions are, of course, debatable. Much depends on how one uses the term 'breakdown' – in both wars, for instance, the global economy fractured into rival trading systems. The human misery of the Depression, stressed by Boyce in his introduction, is surely matched by tragedies such as the Bengal Famine of 1943, which was a direct consequence of war economics. One also has to bear in mind Boyce's idiosyncratic framing of the 1920s and 1930s, not as the interlude between two world wars but within a different and much longer narrative framework. '[J]ust as it makes better sense to recognise that that First World War constituted only a hiatus in the great era of globalisation that

[11] Prusin, *Lands Between*, 174.
[12] Prusin, *Lands Between*, 114.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

began in 1815 and continued until 1927, so it makes better sense to see the years from 1927 to 1947 as a single generalised crisis' that was resolved by new global economic structures – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Although Boyce insists on the need to integrate diplomatic history and economic history, ultimately his overarching framework is derived from the latter.[13]

The result is a book that, if not always convincing, is provocative and stimulating. Boyce's concluding chapter, proposing a new periodisation of the twentieth century, would make an excellent discussion piece for student seminars. And his detailed account of the 1920s and 1930s foregrounds unfamiliar events and themes instead of the traditional narrative. The overall effect is a sustained defence of French foreign policy at the expense of Great Britain and the United States. Contrary to revisionist American scholars since the 1980s, Boyce insists in his introduction, US administrations were not 'independent internationalists', seeking to shore up European economic stability through private finance rather than governmental commitments: they were essentially 'isolationists' who refused to make the crucial commitments to European security. American policymaking was also persistently crippled by the great divide between New York, the country's financial capital, and Washington, the political capital, dominated by populist congressmen consumed with visceral hatred of Wall Street. Boyce is almost as critical of the British. Although broadly accepting Charles Kindleberger's argument that the inter-war global economy lacked a hegemonial leader comparable to Britain before 1913 and America after 1945 –'in 1929 the British and the United States wouldn't'[14] – Boyce argues that Britain still had a continuing capability to lead in the 1920s but that its effectiveness was vitiated by the clash between finance and industry over economic priorities, of which the misguided return to the gold standard in 1925 at the pre-war parity was the most egregious example. Even more important, like America, Britain refused to see the importance of international security to the smooth and successful functioning of the international economy. According to Boyce, British failure to participate in a coherent European security framework in the 1920s and 1930s, where it could have made '*the* decisive contribution', had 'consequences that are hard to exaggerate' for international economic and political stability.[15]

For Boyce the French, by contrast, were essentially right but largely impotent. Successive French leaders, he contends, recognised that German refusal to accept the verdict of Versailles was a threat not only to France's territorial integrity but also to Europe's economic stability: hence their justified opposition to disarmament and their demand for British and American commitments to France's security. The French also understood that the West could not be safe if eastern Europe was unstable – evident in their alliances with key successor states such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. This

[13] Boyce, *Great Inter-war Crisis*, 5, 439.
[14] Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 292.
[15] Boyce, *Great Inter-war Crisis*, 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

policy, he argues, was not one of vindictive encirclement but prudent containment. French leaders rightly feared that Germany, located Janus-like at the heart of the continent, would exploit Anglo-American isolationism from the East to build up its position there against the West. The crisis of the Central European banking system in 1931, which eventually forced Britain off gold, states Boyce, was 'bound up as much with international security as with economics. But since the Anglo-Saxon powers adamantly refused to address the security issue and generally restricted their action to the financial sphere, the solution remained out of reach'.[16]

This Gallic phrase 'Anglo-Saxon powers' reminds us that Boyce's argument echoes that of many French leaders in the 1920s and of revisionist historians in the 1970s, such as Jacques Bariéty, Stephen Schuker and Georges-Henri Soutou, whose detailed analyses of French policy during and after the First World War critiqued the still-dominant belief that France's obdurate adherence to the 'Carthaginian peace' of 1919 had been the main obstacle to European stability in the 1920s and 1930s.[17] In some ways, in fact, Boyce's book seems somewhat dated, even though he is redeploying this line of argument rather voguishly to explain the ebb and flow of globalisation rather than the origins of the Second World War.

Part of the problem with Boyce's book is that he stops in 1934 with the demise of economic liberalism, asserting categorically that 'narrow nationalism and aggressive imperialism became the feature of the next 15 years' in political as well as economic relations. The years 1933–4 are, by contrast, the starting point for *The Triumph of the Dark*, Volume 2 of Zara Steiner's massive study of European international history between the wars. Its predecessor *The Lights That Failed* is cited by Boyce as a classic recent statement of 'the standard narrative' though in fact Steiner, like Boyce, was critical of the British and American failure to sustain French security.[18]

As with its predecessor, Steiner's second and even bigger volume on 1933 to 1939 offers superb syntheses of current international research on critical areas – Chapter 5, for instance, on the 'Spanish Cockpit' of 1936–7 or Chapter 11 on the Czech crisis of 1938 – which will be invaluable for students and teachers alike. But the vast narrative is held together by two theses. First, that Hitler and his intentions are the essential starting point for understanding the period: 30 January 1933 therefore marks 'the first steps' on the road to war. Although the 'lights' of the 1920s – reconstruction, internationalism, multilateralism and disarmament – were already fading during the Depression years (which constitute the 'hinge' of her overall narrative) Steiner argues that those achievements were not doomed by the early 1930s: instead 'the demise of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Hitler proved the motor force of destructive systemic change'. But despite the centrality of 1933, second, this was a 'twisted and tortuous road' to 1939 because Hitler's desire to redraw the map of Europe and,

[16] Ibid., 299.

[17] See the synoptic articles by Jon Jacobson, 'Strategies of French Foreign Policy after World War I', *Journal of Modern History*, 55, 1 (1983), 78–95, and 'Is There a New International History of the 1920s?' *American Historical Review*, 88, 3 (1983), 617–45.

[18] Boyce, *Great Inter-war Crisis,* 423, 451 n. 4; Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), e.g., 594–6, 813–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

equally important, to accomplish this by war, do not constitute a grand design. Steiner stresses the 'contingent nature of much of Hitler's successes', rooted in the chronic failure of European leaders, in France as well as Britain, to understand the mentality of the man. Hence the importance of the final year after Munich and the shift from appeasement to confrontation, which rested on a transformation in basic perceptions about the challenge posed by Hitler. Britain's readiness by 1939 to conclude the alliance vainly sought by France for twenty years was, as Steiner says, 'a major reason for the decision for war'.[19]

German intentions and how they were perceived by other states are critical in explaining the road to war: so too are the military capabilities of the powers, as Joe Maiolo underlines in his study of the international arms race of the 1930s. Maiolo starts with the popular view of the period as a story of 'how wicked dictators (chiefly Hitler) out-armed and out-smarted naive "appeasers" (above all Neville Chamberlain)'. This approach, he says, 'reduces everything to simple choices (to arm or not) and ignores the role of the arms race as an independent, self-perpetuating and often overriding impersonal force that shaped events' by acting as 'the supreme wrecker of all master plans'. Maiolo tells the story of the arms race through a series of broadly chronological chapters that draw in the United States, the Soviet Union and Japan but centre on the European powers, particularly Britain, France and Germany, to show how the arms race operated like 'waves of action and reaction that ripple through the whole international system'. Yet these 'tidal-like effects of arms racing did not force anyone to choose war. In both Rome and Tokyo we can imagine alternative choices being formulated. What made a great European conflict inevitable was Hitler's determination to wage one'. Hitler envisaged a big war with the Soviet Union, hopefully with Britain on his side or else on the sidelines. But faced in 1939 with an emerging Franco–British entente he ploughed on regardless – deciding, in Maiolo's words, to 'run the risk of an all-out war against a constellation of foes that possessed a crushing level of economic superiority over the flagging Third Reich'. Building on Adam Tooze's devastating analysis of the Nazi war economy, Maiolo stresses the gap in resources and wealth between Germany and its rivals which in retrospect 'makes Hitler's decision to venture into an unwinnable war even more astonishing'.[20]

Maiolo argues that the explanation for why events unfolded in this way 'lies in the arms race. Hitler was losing it and he knew it'. The *Führer* certainly spoke in these terms – 'We have no other choice. We must act', he told his generals in August 1939: 'our economic situation is such that we can only hold out for a few more years'. Yet the real driver was surely ideological: Hitler wanted arms and war to achieve his warped policy goals, namely living space in the East and a final solution of the Jewish problem. In Maiolo's account, Hitler's racist ideology often seems secondary to the dynamics of the arms race or, at most, an inter-related factor, as in his reference to

[19] Steiner, *Triumph of the Dark*, 10, 1043, 1047, 1051.

[20] Maiolo, *Cry Havoc*, 2, 3, 5; Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

'the pseudo-scientific racism that laced Hitler's reasoning for the turn eastwards' in 1941. Yet, as Donald Cameron Watt observed twenty years ago, in words echoed by Steiner,

> what is so extraordinary in the events which led up to the outbreak of the Second World War is that Hitler's will for war was able to overcome the reluctance with which everybody else approached it. Hitler willed, desired, lusted after, war, though not war with France and Britain, at least not in 1939.[21]

German policy aside, Maiolo is very illuminating on why and how France and Britain did line up against Hitler in 1939. In his introduction he highlights the notion of 'total war', the full mobilisation of society and economy, that originated in 1914–18, and he discusses both its seductive appeal for 'totalitarian' states and the fear of democratic leaders that rearmament would push them down that totalitarian path or at least provoke domestic conflict about guns versus butter. This was certainly a concern in both London and Paris, restraining rapid rearmament in the mid-1930s but, as Maiolo makes clear, the French predicament was far worse than the British because of the bitter polarisation of Right and Left. Arms policy in 1936–38 became submerged in the frenzied battle over the Popular Front and its package of social benefits, with one ministry following another in quick succession. The febrile nature of French politics in the mid-1930s helps explain why policymakers in London were so wary of a close alliance with Paris and also highlights the problem of stopping the story, as Boyce does, in 1934.

The slowness of British and French rearmament is therefore important in the countdown to war in 1939. But there is another set of vital issues, emerging vividly at times in Maiolo's chapters though not established as themes of the book (the brevity of the introduction and the lack of a conclusion weaken the impact of his work). What matters is not just the simple question of whether a country starts to rearm later than its rivals but the timing of its rearmament in relation to the economic cycle – France got going in earnest in 1936 as the Depression began to bite, whereas Britain's Slump ended earlier and serious rearmament began in 1934. Timing also matters in relation to the foreign policy cycle: France's air force converted to modern monoplanes later than Britain's and was still completing the process in 1939–40 when peace turned into war. Equally important is how a country rearms: which services are given privileged treatment and how closely the process of rearmament is controlled. Germany's frantic but uncoordinated rearmament – graphically detailed by Tooze and summarised incisively by Maiolo – created a balance of payments crisis in the winter of 1936–7 and a chronic shortage of key raw materials, which pushed Hitler towards an expansionary foreign policy in 1938–9. In the German case the arms race, as Maiolo argues, did influence the timing of decisions for war. But the British story was different. Politics and society were more stable than in France and rearmament was more effectively co-ordinated than in Germany, with Neville Chamberlain playing a decisive role first as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1931–7

[21] Maiolo, *Cry Havoc*, 5, 273, 348; Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938–1939* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 610; Steiner, *Triumph of the Dark*, 1057.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

and then as Prime Minister until 1940. Chamberlain established and policed clear rearmament priorities, privileging above all the air force and then the navy. In the air the balance shifted during the 1930s from building up a large bomber force, as deterrent against the *Luftwaffe*, to a system of air defence once it became conceivable to stop the bomber through a combination of modern monoplane fighters and radar stations along the south-east coast. This proved vital during the Battle of Britain. By contrast Chamberlain persistently downgraded the army, on the assumption that if Britain did fight Germany again, it would be in alliance with France whose army would bear the brunt of the western front, at least initially. Meanwhile the air force would defend Britain while the navy secured the imperial lifelines, on which the country's capacity to fight a long war would depend.[22]

This was not a stupid strategy. Maiolo emphasises in Chapter 14 that in May 1940 the Germans were inferior to the French and their allies in most areas of armaments, even tanks and aircraft. And if Hitler had got his way and Germany had attacked the West in the autumn of 1939, its main thrust would have been through Belgium where the strongest elements of the French army were ready to confront the *Wehrmacht*. Victory in May 1940 resulted above all from the shift of Germany's offensive southward to the Meuse, where the French were weak, and from the failure of Allied intelligence to notice the huge traffic jam in the Ardennes. There was, therefore, a large element of luck about Germany's 'strange victory'– the arms race itself was not decisive.[23] But in Britain, political indictments in the wake of Dunkirk, especially the brilliant polemic *Guilty Men*, established the durable idea that in the 1930s Chamberlain and his doddering colleagues had been almost criminally blind to the German threat and sclerotically slow to rearm. Chamberlain certainly had his blind spots, especially about Hitler's intentions, which Steiner brings out caustically in her discussion of his hubristic bid to reach a settlement over Czechoslovakia through personal summitry in September 1938.[24] But the recklessness of Chamberlain's diplomacy was at odds with his cautious and plausible policy for rearmament which, as Maiolo shows, he developed in difficult circumstances – balancing foreign and domestic pressures and co-ordinating the process far more effectively than in France or Germany. Because of luck and misjudgement in 1940, however, that policy came to nothing and Britain spent the rest of the war trying to create an effective army after years of systematic neglect in training, doctrine and weaponry. The Cinderella service of the 1930s remained the weakest link in Britain's war effort after 1939.

[22] The importance of the imperial dimension in Britain's strategy has recently been underlined by David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

[23] Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of* France (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) – an incisive study that has been strangely neglected.

[24] Steiner, *Triumph of the Dark,* 648–51; see also the discussion of Chamberlain's summitry in David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 37–95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

As I have argued elsewhere, Germany's dramatic victory was in many ways the 'fulcrum of the twentieth century'.[25] Hitler, the reckless gambler, emerged as an apparent military genius, strengthening the position of his regime and impelling him into an even more risky assault on Russia in 1941. This ended four years later with the Red Army bestriding half of Europe. Hitler's breathtaking conquest of France in 1940 also encouraged Italy and then Japan to enter the war, even though their economies were even less suited than Germany's for a long struggle against the superior Allied powers. As shown by Maiolo and by Massimiliano Fiore in his monograph on *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940*, Italy's aim in the late 1930s had been to keep Britain in play until 1942–3, by which time supposedly the Italian armed forces would have been ready for war, but France's collapse and Britain's isolation in 1940 offered an opportunity that seemed too good to miss.

Fiore's careful study, based on British and Italian archives, opens up a neglected area of Anglo-Italian imperial rivalry in the 1920s and 1930s, around the Arabian peninsula rather than in the Mediterranean. He also explores the cultural dimensions of diplomacy, such as the battle of the airwaves between Radio Bari and the BBC Arabic Service. Like Maiolo, Fiore often presents British policy in the 1930s in a positive light: for instance he argues that in the April 1938 Anglo-Italian agreements – often portrayed as another example of Chamberlain's craven appeasement – the British did not make any substantive concessions to Italy. In fact it was Mussolini, shaken by the *Anschluss* with Austria in March, who needed a deal to prove that he was not Hitler's puppet before the *Führer* visited Rome in May. On the other hand, at a symbolic level the agreement fortified international impressions of British weakness. The same had happened in 1935–6 over Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia – of no great account to Britain in power-political terms but, as Fiore says, 'an incredible loss of prestige' internationally.[26] Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, of buying off enemies while gaining time for rearmament – might have made sense pragmatically but it severely tarnished the image of British power. And image matters as much as reality in international politics, especially for gamblers such as Hitler and Mussolini: perceptions of British weakness fed their appetite to take risks.

Although Fiore shows that Mussolini was slow to challenge Britain openly, he also insists that Italy was making trouble all through the inter-war period. A central theme of his book is to question the idea of fascist 'good behaviour' in the 1920s, as propounded for instance by Richard Overy or Renzo de Felice. His opening chapter on the Anglo-Italian 'covert war' in the Arabian peninsula and the Red Sea is particularly interesting in this regard. Fiore, like Richard Bosworth, sees fascist diplomacy as part of a historical continuum stretching back into the nineteenth century, aiming at control of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and East Africa as well predominance in the Balkans. As he also argues, Italy's 'mutilated victory' in the First

[25] David Reynolds, '1940: Fulcrum of the Twentieth Century?' *International Affairs*, 66, 2 (1990), 325–50, reprinted in David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt and the International History of the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23–48.

[26] Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations*, 88.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

World War and the Paris peace conference was of decisive importance, engendering a mood of bitterness and setting a diplomatic agenda for the next two decades. Despite Fiore's revisionism on the 1920s, however, the overall effect of his book is to underline the period after 1933. The self-assertion of the Nazi state in Europe allowed Mussolini to move from deeds to words, bolstered by Britain's growing pre-occupation with the German threat. In the early 1920s Hitler owed much to Mussolini's example, but in the 1930s the *Duce*'s diplomacy was defined by the opportunities and problems that the *Führer* created, culminating in Italy's fateful dive through the window of opportunity in 1940.

The books examined here are only a sample of recent writing on the international history of the 1920s and 1930s but they expose some salient themes. One of these is the centrality of Hitler after 1933. His expansionist goals and his determination to achieve them at all costs were the dynamos of European international politics, starting the arms race and driving Germany towards war. At the same time his success in concealing these goals wrong-footed international statesmen from Chamberlain to Stalin. With Germany making the running, the status quo powers scrambled to respond, creating opportunities for other revisionist states such as Italy. Yet, and this is a second theme, Hitler would not have had his chance but for the Depression – Steiner's 'hinge years' between the 1920s, a decade of problems but also of promise, and the looming darkness after 1933. Germany's economic collapse was decisive in converting a struggling right-wing maverick into a major political force: here Weber's account of post-war veterans in the List Regiment strengthens the impression from other work that 1920s Germany was not incorrigibly bent on another war. In similar vein Prusin shows how the Depression undermined the economic and political viability of many of the successor states in eastern Europe, often turning countries with a potential interest in containing Hitler – such as Poland and Czechoslovakia – into bitter rivals. Yet, third, there can be no doubt that post-1918 Europe faced enormous problems of adjustment, as Prusin and Boyce show in different ways by setting the 1920s and 1930s into much longer narrative frameworks. Even before the Depression, post-imperial eastern Europe was a rickety structure, fractured by disputes over borders and minorities. Likewise French policy towards Germany was rooted in historic enmity going back not just to 1914 but to 1870 and 1792. And the Weimar Republic, despite widespread anti-war sentiment, harboured a sizeable and potent sector of the population who were bitterly opposed to the Versailles settlement and alienated from the regime itself.

Which brings us back to the peacemakers of 1919. 'French security policy', argues Robert Boyce,

> was based on the essentially sound assumption that the peace settlement had done all too little to reduce Germany's formidable war-making potential or remove the 'Prussian' elements within Germany: the politicians, industrialists, ministerial officials, judges, professors, soldiers, even trade unionists who hankered for a return to authoritarian government and restoration of a greater Germany.[27]

[27] Boyce, *Great Inter-war Crisis*, 139.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Leaving aside Boyce's premise of an implacably revanchist Germany that had to be repressed, was such social engineering really in the power of the leaders who convened in Paris in 1919? Although ostensibly victors, they were dealing right across the continent with situations they did not control – post-imperial states already in existence in eastern Europe whose problems and frictions they could only try to mitigate and, in the West, a German army that ended the war still on enemy soil while the fatherland itself fell apart. The debate among the Allies about whether and when to sign an armistice with Germany in October 1918 is one of the neglected 'what ifs' of history. 'Had we known how bad things were in Germany', mused the British politician Sir Eric Geddes as early as 12 November 1918, 'we might have got stiffer terms'. Clemenceau spoke in similar vein the following year. Yet for the Allies to impose their will on Germany would have required months more fighting and tens of thousands of additional casualties – both of which were politically inconceivable given the pervasive war-weariness after four years of carnage.[28]

At any event, the fighting ended in 1918 with Germany's army still a fighting force and the country itself not occupied by enemy troops. The Treaty of Versailles, often cited as symbol of punitive Allied victory, actually revealed the limits of their power. Louis XIV's grandiose palace on the edge of Paris had been the venue for Bismarck's proclamation of the German Reich in 1871, his triumphant ending of the Franco–Prussian war. So in 1919 the French inflicted their revenge by staging Germany's humiliation in the very same Hall of Mirrors. But a genuine turning of the tables would have required something different – a treaty imposed on Germany at its own historic heart, at Sans Souci or another of Frederick the Great's palaces in Potsdam on the outskirts of Berlin. That was impossible in 1919 given the circumstances of the Armistice, but in July 1945 Potsdam was indeed the venue for Churchill, Truman and Stalin to decide the fate of Germany and the future of eastern Europe. This time Germany had been totally defeated, thanks to Hitler's hubris, and all of Europe was under Allied occupation – in both cases stark contrasts with 1918–19. And countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia were able to make themselves 'free of Germans' (*Deutschenfrei*) in the next costly round of ethnic cleansing.

The fact that the Allies imposed a Treaty of Versailles on Germany in 1919 not a Treaty of Potsdam highlights the incompleteness of their victory, from which stemmed many of Europe's problems in the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand in 1945–6, unlike in 1919, the totally victorious Allies were unable to agree on any treaty, however flawed, to deal with the German question. This time the result was not another world war twenty years later but a Cold War that lasted almost half a century.

[28] David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 541–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S096077731200015X Published online by Cambridge University Press