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A THIRTY YEARS' WAR? THE TWO WORLD WARS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

The Prothero Lecture

By Michael Howard

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THE great Helmuth von Moltke, addressing the German Reichstag in May 1890 in the last year of his very long life, gave a sombre warning of wars to come:

Gentlemen, if the war which has hung over our heads for more than ten years like a sword of Damocles—if this war were to break out, no one could foresee how long it would last nor how it would end. The greatest powers in Europe, armed as never before, would confront each other in battle. None of them could be so completely overthrown in one or two campaigns that they would have to admit defeat, accept peace on harsh terms, and not be able to revive again after a years'-long interval to renew the struggle. Gentlemen, it could be a Seven Years' War; it could be a Thirty Years' War; and woe to the man who sets Europe ablaze, who first throws the match into the powder barrel!¹

We now tend to think of the Two World Wars as discrete and separate, rather than as a Thirty Years' War divided by an interval for recovery, such as von Moltke so darkly foresaw. The image and the experience of the two wars, at least for the British, could hardly have been more different. In the twenty years that separated them, technology had transformed military techniques. The deadlock of trench warfare had been broken; mechanization, air power and radio-communications had restored mobility to the battlefield. Air power had extended destruction to the cities of the belligerents, so that the horrors of the Somme and Passchendaele were to be eclipsed by those of Coventry

*It was only some months after completing the text of this lecture that I came across the treatment of the 'Thirty Years War' question by Dr P.H.M. Bell in his excellent work *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (London and New York 1986). I am deeply ashamed of this oversight. Had I read Dr Bell's work, I would have adopted a different approach, if indeed I had tackled the problem at all. But I hope that I have provided at least a tentative answer to some of the questions he raised.

¹Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918: Kriegsrüstung und Kriegswirtschaft, Anlagen zum ersten band.* (Berlin 1930) 43.

and Dresden. Above all, the extension of hostilities to the Pacific set on foot a new, complex and terrible conflict in that region whose battles bore almost as little resemblance to those of the First World War as they did to the battle of Waterloo.

But were the two World Wars really one war; two acts, as it were in a single drama? This is of course a deeply controversial issue in Germany. For the Germans, the suggestion that both wars resulted from a continuous national policy pursued by both the Second and the Third Reich calls in question their entire structure of national values;² whether through the thesis advanced by Fritz Fischer that the Second Reich, so far from fighting a defensive war, had hegemonic intentions as grandiose as those of the Third, or, conversely, the suggestion that Hitler's ambitions were simply a continuation of German traditional statesmanship; that impish Taylorian thesis which, however often it is crushed by argument and scholarship, refuses, like those other imps Petrushka or Till Eulenspiegel, to lie down and die. In a more recent *Historikerstreit* we have seen how sensitive German historians have been to both the suggestion, put forward by Ernst Nolte, that Hitler's policy should be seen as part of some historical continuum, and to the plea from Michael Stürmer that not only the Second but perhaps even the Third Reich embodied values that should not be totally jettisoned by a Germany seeking a new identity.³

British historians can sympathise with the sensitivities of our German colleagues and would not wish to exacerbate their problems. Nonetheless, from the point of view of German's adversaries and victims in those wars, the continuity is more apparent than the differences; however much military methods may have been transformed in the interval between them. So far as Britain and France were concerned, 1939 simply brought a renewal of war against a Germany who presented the same kind of threat as she had in 1914, and over a very similar issue. Neither went to war simply to preserve Polish independence, any more than Britain went to war in 1914 simply to preserve Belgian independence. Both fought to check what they saw as a renewed German bid for continental if not world hegemony. In 1939, as in 1914, British participation turned what might have been purely European into a World War; and as was the case in the First World War, support for British resistance ultimately drew in the United States, thus decisively weighting the balance against a Germany who, against a purely European coalition, would almost certainly have prevailed. The crushing of Germany in 1945 was seen by Britain and her allies, at least by

² See e.g. sources cited by Karl Dietrich Erdman in *The Origins of The First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, ed. H. W. Koch (2nd edn., 1984) 345.

³ For a summary of the *Historikerstreit*, see *German History*, VI (1988), 63-78.

the generation which had experience the First World War (and this, we must remember, included virtually all their military and political leaders) as the completion of business left unfinished in 1918. An interesting symptom of this attitude was the continuing identification during the Second World War of 'Prussia' as the continuing focus of German militarism, in spite of the negligible part played by Prussia, and indeed by Prussians, in the promotion of the Nazi revolution and the formulation of National Socialist ideology.⁴

For Britain indeed, as for her Continental allies, both wars were really about a single issue—what might be called 'the German Question'; and the German Question had been defined so well by Sir Eyre Crowe in the famous memorandum he wrote in January 1907 in the aftermath of the Tangier crisis, that it merits the constant quotation that it has received.⁵

No one, argued Crowe, could doubt that 'the mere existence and healthy activity of a powerful Germany is an undoubted blessing to the world' or that Germany had every right to compete for 'intellectual and moral leadership': but

If Germany believes that greater relative preponderance of material power, wider extent of territory, inviolable frontiers and supremacy at sea are necessary and preliminary possessions without which any aspirations to such leadership must end in failure, then England must expect that Germany will surely seek to diminish the power of any rivals, to enhance her own by extending her dominion, to hinder the co-operation of other States, and ultimately to break up and supplant the British Empire.

And he posed the question, which was to be of startling relevance in 1938 for Czechoslovakia and in 1939 for Poland,

Whether it should be right, or even prudent, for England to incur any sacrifice or see other, friendly, nations sacrificed merely in order to assist Germany in building up step by step the fabric of a universal preponderance, in the blind confidence that in the exercise of such a preponderance Germany will confer unmixed blessings on the world at large, and promote the welfare and happiness of all other peoples without doing injury to any one.

When he wrote those words in 1907, Eyre Crowe was doing no more than summarizing the *Weltpolitische* ambitions being expressed at the

⁴See Michael Howard, 'Prussia in German History' in *Lessons of History* (Oxford 1991), 49.

⁵In *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914*, eds. G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, III (1928), 397-420.

time in Germany by public figures from the kaiser downward; ambitions arising from a consciousness of capabilities denied opportunities, of huge power denied outlet—and denied outlet, it was believed, specifically by Britain. I will not weary you with the familiar quotations: Max Weber's Inaugural Lecture at Freiburg in 1895, with its declaration 'that the unification of Germany was a youthful folly ... if it should be the conclusion and not the starting point for a German *Weltpolitik*'; Hans Delbrück's statement in the *Preussische Jahrbücher* of November 1899, that, 'We want to be a World Power and pursue colonial policy in the grand manner ... the entire future of our people among the great nations depends on it'; to choose only the most moderate and respectable of the academics, and ignore the outpourings of the Pan German League.⁶ These advocates of *Weltpolitik* threw down an explicit challenge to Britain. 'We can pursue this policy with England or against England', Delbrück had continued. 'With England means peace; against England means—through war.' For Admiral von Tirpitz and his followers in the Navy League, peaceful accommodation with England was to be obtained through pressures and threats of a kind indistinguishable, in the British view, from expressions of hostile intentions; and to make those pressures credible German leaders found it politic to stir up among their public opinion an *England-hass* that was almost without precedent in the history of international politics. It was to find expression when war broke out in Lissauer's notorious 'Hymn of Hate'.⁷

So in 1914 there was for Britain quite certainly a German Problem—a problem of great capabilities compounded by very evident hostile intentions. The full measure of those capabilities became clear only when war broke out, with the spectacular victories of the German armies on every front. Probably not even the Germans had appreciated the formidable extent of their military power until they saw it in action, much less realised the opportunities that their victories would present. Fritz Fischer has documented very thoroughly the full range of German ambitions that was maturing before 1914, even if he failed—as in my opinion he did fail—to prove that Germany deliberately began the war

⁶ Quoted by Immanuel Geiss in *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalry and German War Aims*, ed. H. W. Koch (2nd edn., 1984) 50–2. See also Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (Oxford, 1986) and Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism* (1980).

⁷ Ernst Lissauer, *Germany's Hymn of Hate* first appeared in the Munich journal *Jugend* and was published in an English translation by Barbara Henderson in 1914 by the Central Committee for Political Organisations, Leaflet No. 112. Its refrain ran:

We shall never forego our hate
 We have all but a single hate
 We love as one, we hate as one
 We have one foe and one alone
 ENGLAND!

in order to fulfil them. Most of them were to find a place in the famous 'September Memorandum' of 1914, and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg defined their overall object as being to provide

security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time. For this purpose France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust back as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian peoples broken.⁸

To this others add their glosses: the virtual annexation of Belgium and the mineral resources of France; a great African empire; a powerful *Mittel Europa* as the basis for an expanded German economy; a vassal Poland; perhaps some German settlements to provide security in the East.

But extensive as they were, these were war aims of a traditional kind, a quest for absolute security through extension of territorial control; an objective not unusual among continental powers. But absolute security for Germany was absolute insecurity for everyone else—not least the British. Hence the conclusion of the British government in 1914 that the German problem could be solved only by the destruction, not so much of German power, as of the regime and the philosophy, generally stigmatised at the time as 'Prussianism', wielding that power.⁹

That was easier said than done. German military power and military skills proved immense, and the uninterrupted course of her military victories only strengthened the determination of her military and most of her political leaders to secure objectives commensurate with those victories and the sacrifices involved in gaining them. Although the Social Democrats remained true to their objective of peace without annexations and indemnities, the growth and influence of the Fatherland Front showed that expansionist war aims were not a monopoly of the military elites—certainly not the 'Prussian' elites targeted by British propaganda.

Nor could 'Prussianism' be destroyed after the war simply through the overthrow of the monarchy that embodied it; any more than Germany's power could be destroyed by the dissolution of her armed forces and the limited occupation of her territories. Whatever the peaceful intentions of the Weimar Republic, the basis of that power remained intact in the size of German's population, in her industrial strength, in the excellence of her technology, and in a military expertise too deep-rooted to be destroyed by the abolition of her general staff.

⁸Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (1967), 103ff.

⁹See e.g. Norman Angell, *Prussianism and its Destruction* (1914).

The essence of that power remained intact, and available for any government willing to develop and make use of it.

There were few illusions about this at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. But short of the kind of total conquest, occupation, division and debellation imposed on Germany in 1945, which probably lay beyond the capacity if not the ambitions of the victorious allies in 1918, what could be done about it?

The French had the clearest idea: cripple German economic power by annexing the Rhineland, by giving the industries of Silesia to the Poles, and by imposing massive reparations on Germany; the latter, admittedly, not so much in order to weaken German economy as to justify long-term occupation of the left bank of the Rhine. But how practicable was such a policy in the long run—and how much sense did it make for the economy of Europe as a whole? In any case it was a programme unacceptable to the British; both to British conservatives who did not want to see a German domination of Europe replaced by a French or, worse, a Bolshevik one, and to British liberals whose temperamental inclination to conciliation was strengthened by the arguments of Maynard Keynes.

Once that programme proved impossible, France turned to another course of action; accepting the inevitability of German revival but trying to create a balance against it, by building alliances in eastern Europe. But these new, weak east European states could provide no serious substitute for France's traditional ally, Russia; and Russia's revolutionary intentions now alarmed many people even more than did the spectre of a revitalised Germany. In any case the French political leadership was incapable of providing an army that could implement the projects of their diplomats. Meanwhile the British were indifferent, and both the United States and the Soviet Union had ruled themselves *hors de combat*. It had taken, we must remember, the combined efforts of all these powers to defeat Germany in 1918.

It is thus not surprising that within six years of the war's ending we find all Germany's former adversaries abandoning the attempt to destroy her power, and instead pursuing the path of conciliation, whether via Rapallo or via Locarno. Within twenty years the verdict of Versailles had been effectively reversed without a shot being fired. By November 1938 the reparations question had been settled and the Germany economy was booming. All servitudes imposed on Germany with respect to her western borders had been lifted. The German rump of the old Habsburg monarchy had been peacefully absorbed into the Third Reich. The principle of national self-determination was being applied in the multi-ethnic conglomerate of Czechoslovakia. German economic power dominated central Europe. There was left only the question of Germany's borders with Poland; and given the acquiescent

posture of both the British and French governments there is no reason to suppose that a tough, skilful, and above all patient German government could not have settled those in its favour as well. By 1938 Germany had regained a dominance in Europe at least comparable to that of Bismarck; and like that of Bismarck, it was exercised with the willing consent of the British government and the glum acquiescence of the French. Why, therefore did a Second World War break out in September 1939?

The short answer is that Britain decided that it should. War takes place, as Clausewitz pointed out, mainly for the defender: 'the conqueror would like to make his entry into our country unopposed'.¹⁰ If Britain had so decided, war would have broken out a year earlier over the Sudetenland, or indeed three years earlier in 1936, when Germany re-occupied the Rhineland. As it was, by guaranteeing the independence of Poland in March 1939, the British government quite deliberately created a risk of war, and did so with overwhelming public support. It did not want war: not even Neville Chamberlain's bitterest adversaries can accuse him of war-mongering; but on the assumption that Hitler did not want war either, the creation of such a risk was the only deterrent at Britain's disposal against an extension of German power far transcending the acceptable continental dominance established by 1938.

The assumption was of course false. Hitler *did* want war, if not that particular war at that particular time; and even if he had not wanted war, he wanted objectives which, whether achieved peacefully or by violence, would have established Germany in a hegemonic position undreamed of by even the most ambitious statesmen of the Wilhelmine Reich. As was becoming increasingly clear, his adversaries were faced with the stark alternatives of resistance or surrender.

Eyre Crowe's analysis, in fact, was still valid after thirty years. A powerful Germany in itself posed no threat to British interests or international stability: after all, Bismarck had provided stability in Europe for a quarter of a century. Indeed in the 1930s a powerful Germany—especially a powerful right-wing Germany—was widely believed to provide a further advantage by acting as a bulwark against Bolshevism; and for that the possessing classes in both France and Britain were prepared to forgive Hitler a very great deal. For many of them, indeed, Hitler's Germany provided not so much a threat as a reassurance, if not indeed a model. To a Germany, however powerful,

¹⁰Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, VI, Chapter 5.

offering real stability, Britain and France would have yielded much—certainly not excluding the Polish Corridor.

But in the latter half of the 1930s Eyre Crowe's rhetorical question became more relevant with almost every day that passed:

whether it could be right, or even prudent, for England to incur any sacrifice or see other, friendly nations sacrificed merely in order to assist Germany in building up step by step the fabric of a universal preponderance, in the blind confidence that in the exercise of such a preponderance Germany will confer unmixed blessings on the world at large.¹¹

By 1939 the answer to that question had become clear. German power and intentions were once again threatening the structure of a world-system on whose stability British power precariously depended. Hitler was no Bismarck; he was not even William II; he was Hitler.

Even in 1939 few people in Britain appreciated who Hitler was, and what he intended to do. Neville Chamberlain, broadcasting to the nation on the outbreak of war rightly told his listeners that 'it is evil things we shall be fighting against', and he went on to define them: 'brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution'.¹² It was an accurate enough description of Hitler's methods but hardly an adequate account of his objectives. Nor did it really explain why the British people found themselves at war. Hitler might be guilty of all these crimes and still pose no threat to British interests. But Chamberlain can hardly be blamed for his lack of understanding if, twenty years later, a British historian so expert in the history of Germany and central Europe as A. J. P. Taylor could, like Mr Chamberlain, stigmatise Hitler as being 'wicked', but doubt whether he had any long-term objectives at all.¹³

In their baffled and insular incomprehension of Hitler's ultimate objectives, both Neville Chamberlain and A. J. P. Taylor were probably typical of the bulk of their fellow countrymen. But the British were concerned less with the details of the Nazi programme than with the revival of the power and ambition of the German State, however horrific that programme might be. Britain did not go to war in 1939 to destroy Fascism, or to defend democracy, much less to rescue the Jews. Even the destruction of Poland—another far-away people, like

¹¹ See n. 5 above.

¹² Keith Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1970), 416.

¹³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961), 69–71.

the Czechs, of whom the British knew nothing—would hardly have constituted a *casus belli* if it had not been seen to add an intolerable accretion to the menace of German power. Britain went to war in 1939, thus ultimately turning a central European border-dispute into a world holocaust, for the oldest, the least reputable, but the most basic of all motives—power politics; to resolve Humpty Dumpty's question 'Who will be master—that's all'. But power-politics, as a rather repentant pacifist Norman Angell had found himself forced to confess in the 1930s, is sometimes the politics of not being overpowered.¹⁴

The British decision left Hitler baffled and angry. He did not want war with England and did not see the need for it. His long-term aims are now clearer to us than they were to Neville Chamberlain and even to A.J.P. Taylor, but they had been set out in *Mein Kampf* for all to see. His policy was amazingly consistent as to ends, however flexible it may have been as to means. His object, set out in *Mein Kampf* and constantly reiterated thereafter in speech after speech, was the recreation of a new German nation, cleansed of all the cultural and racial imperfections that had resulted from the process of modernisation, and above all from the termite-like activities of those enemies of culture and cleanliness, the Jews; microbes in the body-politic that had to be eliminated, if necessary exterminated, if the Germans were ever to be restored to sanity and health.¹⁵ Further, the industrialisation and urbanisation of Germany which had done so much to rot good, healthy German stock was to be balanced and counteracted by the preservation and extension of the German peasantry, rooted in good, healthy German soil. But since there was not enough suitable territory within the existing frontiers of Germany to provide adequate living space for such an extension, more must be acquired: much as the British, Hitler pointed out, another over-industrialised people, had acquired colonies of settlement all over the world.

But such overseas settlements, Hitler realised, were likely to break away and create new states of their own. Even if they did not, links with them had to be defended by an expensive navy, the creation of which had proved so disastrous before 1914. Germany had therefore to find its *Lebensraum* in the contiguous territories to the East; territories not only temperate and fertile, but providentially left in a state of chaos by the collapse of a Russian Empire that had in any case only been kept going by its German elites. As a superior *Kulturvolk*, the Germans had as much right, and indeed duty, to take possession of and rule these territories as the Anglo-Saxons had to extend their rule throughout

¹⁴Norman Angell, *After All* (1951), 137.

¹⁵Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trsl. Karl Mannheim (1969) *passim*, esp. 126–37. On the Jews, see *Hitler's Table Talk 1941–44* (2nd edn., 1973), 332.

the extra-European world. The inferior peoples who inhabited them were to be either subordinated, as the British had subordinated the native inhabitants of their African and Asian colonies, or eliminated, as the Americans had eliminated the redskins.¹⁶

Hitler recognised that in order to achieve these objectives it would certainly be necessary to have a final settlement of accounts with France.¹⁷ But why should Britain object to them? One of the principal grounds for Hitler's objections to German *Weltpolitik* before 1914 was that it had brought Germany into an entirely unnecessary conflict with England. Unlike so many *Weltpolitiker* of the Wilhelmine era, Hitler did not consider the humiliation of Britain as a necessary step in the fulfilment of Germany's destiny as a world power. Indeed, Hitler seems to have been far less concerned with Germany's world status than he was with her cultural integrity: unlike the imperialists of the Wilhelmine era, he wanted colonies and expansion for reasons of domestic stability and racial health rather than for global prestige, or even national security. There was much to be lost by antagonising Britain—Hitler's experiences on the western front had given him a healthy respect for her as an adversary¹⁸—and everything to be gained by befriending her; so long as she did not block his ambitions to the East. If the worst came to the worst he would have to fight, and, if need be, invade her; but he could never quite believe that, ultimately, good sense would not prevail and that the right-minded people in whose influence he stubbornly believed would not at the last moment mount a *coup* to overthrow the Jewish warmongers and their leader Churchill. There is indeed an interesting parallel to be drawn between the hopes he placed on such a development, and those that British optimists placed on a comparable coup against Hitler.

We know that such 'right-minded people' did exist; but the remarkable thing is not that they should have existed, but that there should have been so few of them, and that their influence should have been so slight. There was after all little affection among the British for the French, and even less for the small nations of eastern Europe. There was, at least on the right wing, endemic fear of communism and some respect for the measures Hitler had taken to eradicate it. There was, to put it mildly, less sympathy for the Jews than one would wish, although anti-semitism had not penetrated so deeply into British society as it had into French. There was an overriding concern for the security of the Empire and much suspicion of any continental commitment;

¹⁶ Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State and the Course of Expansion* (1973), 212–49.

¹⁷ *Mein Kampf*, 609, 616.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

and among the population as a whole, there was a deep disinclination to go to war.

But none of these considerations could override the fundamental perception that, confronting a powerful and dynamic Germany dominating the continent—and, now, commanding considerable air power—Britain was not safe, or that at best her security would depend on the whim of an unpredictable ruler in Berlin. The distinction between *Weltpolitik* and *Lebensraum* as German objectives was, for the British people, academic: what mattered was the huge accumulation of German power and the evident determination of Germany's leaders to use it to extend their dominion. Even those who most sympathised with Hitler's objectives disliked the prospect of Britain becoming a tributary kingdom within the German Reich, even if their own suzerainty still embraced half of the extra-European world. So with immense reluctance, and in full realisation of the unfavourable odds, the British government decided once again to confront German power with armed force as they had in 1914, and to overthrow the regime wielding it.

But the odds were now not only unfavourable; they were impossible. The balance of power had radically shifted since 1914. After the interval foreseen by von Moltke, Germany had remobilised her resources and the will to use them. Of her former adversaries, Russia and the United States had dropped out of the contest, France was exhausted and Britain had barely begun the remobilisation of military strength needed to turn her once more into an effective continental power. Within less than a year German domination of the continent had been converted by military conquest into a hegemony that Britain was no longer in any position to contest. Even if the subjugation of Britain herself was not immediately practicable, the British could hope to do no more than stave off defeat unless, improbably, the United States emerged from its isolation and once again came to their rescue. The ambitions listed in the September Memorandum of 1914 could now be realised. France was debellated. A protectorate was established over the Low Countries. German naval control was extended from Norway to the Pyrenees. German dominance in *Mittleuropa* was unchallengeable. Certain aspirations in the Baltic remained unfulfilled, but if a limited war with the Soviet Union proved necessary to 'liberate' the Baltic Republics, there was no doubt who would have been the victor. *Weltpolitik*, the acquisition of an overseas Empire, still awaited the defeat of England, but few people in Germany were any longer interested; Hitler least of all. The war for the mastery of Europe that had begun in 1914 was over, and the Germans had won it.

With that victory the overwhelming majority of the German people

would no doubt have been content, and sooner or later Britain would have had to accept it. Had the German military victories of 1939–40 led to the creation of a politically and economically stable Greater Germany at the centre of an acquiescent Europe, they might have been regarded as the logical continuation and fulfilment of those of 1866–70. Hitler would have established his place as the rightful successor of Bismarck and of Frederick the Great. But that was not the role in which he had cast himself. The dynamic of the Nazi revolution had not been exhausted; the objectives outlined in *Mein Kampf*, never lost to sight, had not yet been achieved. So a year later, to the astonishment of the world and not least of the Germans themselves, Hitler launched a new and apparently quite unnecessary war against the Soviet Union, in pursuit of objectives that would have amazed the German policy-makers of 1914.

To the British, of course, it did not look like a new war. They saw the German invasion of the Soviet Union as a necessary preliminary to the defeat of Britain. It fitted comfortably within their historical experience of the Napoleonic Wars from which, under the tutelage of Sir Arthur Bryant, they had been deriving much-needed comfort.¹⁹ But German historians who claim that Hitler represented a divergence from rather than a continuation of the mainstream of German history argue that this truly was a different war, one fought for different objectives and using radically different methods from the war for European hegemony that had been fought and won in the West. In my view they are correct.

There were certainly strategic arguments for attacking and defeating the Soviet Union even before the defeat of England. There was the erroneous belief that the British were sustained by expectation of Soviet help; together with the quite correct view that since Roosevelt's America would not easily permit Britain to be destroyed, the war might be a long one. There was the realisation that the Soviet Union would continue to be a tough rival both in the Baltic and in the Balkans.²⁰ But none of these arguments were compelling. Stalin showed no signs of abandoning his complaisant neutrality or interrupting his substantial deliveries of war material to the Third Reich; while the lamentable performance of the Red Army in the 'Winter War' against Finland makes highly implausible the argument sometimes advanced that the Soviet Union was itself planning a surprise attack. There was no strategic compulsion for Hitler to attack the Soviet Union when he did. No: the only convincing explanation of his decision is that he was

¹⁹ See Arthur Bryant, *The Years of Endurance* and *The Years of Victory* (1942 and 1944).

²⁰ Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie: Politik und Kriegsführung 1940–41* (Bernard und Graefe Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1965).

anxious to proceed as quickly as possible to the next and final stage of the programme he had outlined in *Mein Kampf*, for which his victories in the west had been no more than a necessary preliminary. The Soviet Union was to be destroyed; the frontiers of slavdom were to be pushed back to the furthest possible extent; the newly conquered territories were to be settled with good German peasant stock, and the native inhabitants either subjugated or exterminated. Poland had already provided a testing bed for this programme. A few months later, at the Wannsee conference in January 1942, the decision was taken to use the extermination techniques being developed on the Eastern Front to provide a final solution to the Jewish problem in Europe as a whole.²¹

Was this programme a mere extension of the German war aims of 1914? I find it hard to believe so. In 1914 the German people went enthusiastically to war for vague and splendid causes; to assert and extend the greatness of their country, to destroy encircling enemies, to show that the spirit of 1870 was not dead. Would they have marched eastward with equal enthusiasm in 1941 if they had known what Hitler's very precise war aims were? It must be said that if they did not know, it was hardly Hitler's fault; after all, he had presented a copy of *Mein Kampf* to every newly-wedded couple, and the work is by no means so turgid and unreadable as is so often depicted. But Hitler himself had repeatedly expressed his doubts as to the will and the capacity of the German people to carry out his intentions unless they had been carefully indoctrinated, and indeed bred, to do so.²² Many of them were so indoctrinated in the short time available, and carried out Hitler's gruesome programme with enthusiasm and efficiency. But it is only fair to note that it was not only the Germans who did this: Balts, Poles, Austrians and Ukrainians all assisted in the extermination process. Even in the 'liberal' societies of western Europe the police made no difficulties when called on to round up the Jews. In France and the Netherlands they did so with exemplary efficiency.²³

Further, Hitler's ideas were not specifically German.²⁴ Many of them he had absorbed in pre-war Vienna from the Austrians Karl Lüger and Georg von Schönerer. If one had to name the major focus of anti-Semitism in pre-1914 Europe, one would probably cite France, or possibly Russia, before even considering Germany. The concept of *Lebensraum*, a healthy balance between population and soil, was implicit

²¹ Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims vol II: the Establishment of the New Order* (1974), 7.

²² *Mein Kampf*, 31, 307. See also Esme Robertson, *The Origins of the Second World War* (1971), 13.

²³ See Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1914-15: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (1985). For European support for Hitler's policies see John Lukacs, *The Last European War* (1976) and Norman Rich, *op. cit.*, II, *passim*.

²⁴ *Mein Kampf*, 91, 109, 111.

in much British Imperialist literature in the 'eighties and 'nineties, and one of the earliest expositors was a Scandinavian scholar, Rudolph Kjellen. Hitler learned his racism from a Frenchman, Gobineau, and an Englishman, Houston Stewart Chamberlain; while the idea of compulsory sterilisation of the unfit was sufficiently respectable to have been taken up enthusiastically by the British Home Secretary in 1910: Mr Winston Churchill.²⁵

None of these ideas were, in fact, peculiar to Germany. Before 1914 they were as marginal there as they were in the rest of Europe. Although they may have been germinating in the minds of a few German right-wing thinkers at the time, they certainly did not figure in the war aims of the Wilhelmine Reich. It required Hitler's malign genius, first to crystallise them into a coherent programme, and then to play on the hopes, the fears, and the resentments of the German people to gain an ascendancy over them so absolute as to make them his willing accomplices in carrying it out. Hitler was the product of a European, not specifically a German culture; certainly not that of the Germany of 1914.

Nevertheless it was only Germany's victory in the long European war foreseen by von Moltke—a twenty-five, rather than a thirty-years war—that made it possible for Hitler to implement his programme. Germany had to win the interrupted First World War before he was able to embark so disastrously on the Second.

²⁵ Paul Addison, *Churchill on the Home Front 1900-55* (1992), 124-6.