

Good and Bad Lessons from “The Good War”

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The example of World War II is a problem for peace advocates and anti-militarists.^[1] While most wars, in retrospect, seem cruel, wasteful, and ultimately avoidable, World War II has gone down in history, journalism, and popular memory as a just and necessary war—*just* because it was a war against the very personification of evil, and *necessary* because it was forced by an aggressor on unwilling combatants. Thus the most destructive war in human history has become known as “the Good War.”^[2]

Moreover, in retrospect it seems obvious that Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany with the intention of refighting—and this time winning—the First World War, enlarging the German state at the expense of its eastern neighbors, and exterminating entire races of people. Hitler turned out to be insatiable and undeterrable, and it has seemed obvious to many that he should have been resisted with military force when he first began to threaten the peace.^[3] Thus the lesson taken from World War II by the educated public, newsweekly journalists, and U.S. presidents is that international threats should be stopped forcefully and early.^[4]

In this paper, however, I argue that the lead-up to World War II suggests two quite different lessons. To substantiate the lesson that “if you want peace, work for justice,” I will show that the Versailles treaty, establishing as it did a patently unjust international order, was responsible not just for the rise of Hitler (which has long been accepted as the case) but for giving him a strategy for initiating the imperialist and racist war that he had long dreamed

of. To substantiate the lesson that “there is no way to peace, peace is the way,” I will argue that the policy of appeasement was the only just policy, that preemptive war would have been no solution at all, and that appeasement effectively denied Hitler the war he so badly wanted. It was in fact the switch from appeasement to deterrence that precipitated the war. I will argue that even in 1939 the pursuit of peace and justice was a practical and hopeful policy.

The treaty dictated to Germany by the victorious Allies at Versailles in 1919 has been nearly universally condemned by historians as punitive, vindictive, and hypocritical. It was based on the proposition that Germany was solely responsible for the outbreak of World War I and therefore for all of the destruction of the war years. The treaty disarmed Germany, took away 10 percent of its territory, and imposed a bill for reparations that was impossible to pay. It can be held accountable for World War II in two ways.

The first is uncontroversial and can be dealt with summarily. Virtually every work dealing with the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party begins by noting the resentment felt by the German people at the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. A major factor in the decline of the moderate parties of Weimar Germany was their failure to obtain a revision of the treaty, and a major source of support for Hitler was his denunciation of it. Richard Overy speaks for the historical consensus when he says that because of Versailles “a powerful sense of injustice scarred a whole generation of Germans.” Overy asserts that it was inevitable that Germany would forcibly break out of the international order established at Versailles, “led as it was by embittered and radical veterans of German collapse in 1918.”^[5]

This consideration, which has now become conventional wisdom, immediately suggests that the best lesson to be drawn from the rise of Hitler is “if you want peace, work for justice.” Why talk about the need to nip aggression in the bud if Hitler’s assumption of power in the first place could have been prevented by a just revision of the Versailles Treaty? No unjust treaty, no Hitler. The reason this has not become the great lesson of the road to World War II lies more in the psychology of the observers than in the facts of the matter. Adherents of the “nip aggression in the bud” school choose to think about how Hitler could have been stopped after he came to power, not how he could have been prevented from coming to power in the first place.

Versailles as the Basis for War

This paper, however, deals with a second way in which the Versailles Treaty can be held accountable for World War II. I argue that it was the treaty—and not Hitler’s genius—that provided him the blueprint for engineering war. The injustices of the Versailles Treaty gave Hitler a plausible smokescreen behind which he could conceal his real intentions, while those same injustices denied his opponents a moral foundation for resisting him. Few historians now doubt that Hitler took power with the intention of launching war to dominate Europe, colonize the East, and exterminate inferior races. Nevertheless, as I shall show, all the key steps in Hitler’s military build-up and territorial expansion from 1934 to 1938 were seen—by both the German people and the western democracies—as reasonable corrections of an unreasonable treaty. If Germany had existed in a peaceful Europe with a just international order (i.e., if the Versailles Treaty had not been written, or if it had been revised before 1933), Hitler’s preparations for war would have been viewed with alarm not only by Germany’s neighbors but also by the German people.

Germans were no more anxious for war than the British or French, and their enthusiastic support for Hitler’s foreign policy in the 1930s was not because they thought he was preparing for aggressive war—Hitler actually did his best to conceal the goals for conquest and genocide that he had spelled out in *Mein Kampf*—but because they thought he was revising a humiliating treaty and correcting an unjust international order. In the words of historian Ian Kershaw,

Hitler had always enjoyed a particular talent, approaching demagogic genius, for appealing to the populist national emotions, hopes, and aggression of increasing numbers of ordinary Germans, in particular by exploiting the deep-rooted resentments which the name “Versailles” conjured up. But he consciously, and probably very wisely, refrained from speaking much in public and in detail about his own annexationist and imperialist “*Lebensraum*” aims which went way beyond any revision of the Versailles settlement. This would have been risky not only in diplomatic but also in domestic terms, and would from the beginning have heavily burdened the politically unifying emotional desire for restoration of national “honour” and “greatness” with the fear of a new war and the miseries that would bring for the German people.^[6]

R. A. C. Parker adds that “Hitler’s demands for the destruction of Versailles won him

support at home and disguised his ambitions both from the German people and from foreign statesmen. Most Germans wished to change Versailles and many, therefore, sympathized with what they thought to be Hitler's international aims."^[7]

Germany's neighbors knew very well that the Versailles Treaty was unjust and that revision was inevitable. According to Richard J. Evans, "Germany enjoyed a great deal of sympathy internationally in the early-to-mid-1930s. The idealism that had played such a huge part in the creation of the Peace Settlement of 1918-19 had long turned round to work against it. The principle of national self-determination, invoked to give independence to countries like Poland, had manifestly been denied to Germany itself."^[8] Europeans felt "... a sense of guilt at the harshness of the peace terms and a general disbelief in the war guilt clause that pinned the blame on Germany."^[9] P. M. H. Bell makes the same point, and adds that in France, "as late as August 1939 some socialist speakers still began their remarks on foreign affairs with a ritual condemnation of the Treaty of Versailles."^[10] Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of Great Britain, 1937-40, "genuinely believed that the Versailles Treaty of 1919 had given the Germans 'good cause to ask for consideration of their grievances.'"^[11]

It was precisely this attitude that led to the policy of appeasement—at the time a normal concept in international relations—indicating "the policy of settling international ... quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly very dangerous."^[12] Peter Neville argues that the policy of appeasement began "even before the Treaty of Versailles was signed, [as] British leaders began to doubt the wisdom of a punitive approach."^[13] Moreover, it was not just European statespeople who felt that it would be criminal folly to engulf Europe in a second great war just to enforce international laws that were patently unjust. They were responding to a widespread popular desire for conciliation and peace.^[14] Indeed, in England, in an unofficial "Peace Ballot" organized by the League of Nations Union, the population voted overwhelmingly for arms reductions and for nonmilitary solutions to international problems.^[15]

Moreover, the Versailles Treaty played into Hitler's hand by drawing unprincipled territorial boundaries in Eastern Europe. Despite the professed goal of national self-determination of peoples, the statespeople who redrew the map of Europe at Versailles had

strategic and not idealistic goals. They rewarded their allies with the maximum possible territory and punished their enemies by reducing them to the minimum possible territory. Moreover, plebiscites to determine the will of affected populations were used only where the outcome was certain to support the Versailles settlement. As we shall see, deep national enmities were created that not only made it impossible for the leaders of Eastern Europe to unite in solidarity against Hitler but turned some of them into his collaborators.

The first provision of the Versailles Treaty that Hitler overturned was Germany's demilitarization. The treaty had limited the German army to 100,000 soldiers on twelve-year enlistments with no conscription and no reserve forces. The army was not allowed to possess tanks, heavy artillery, or air force. The navy was forbidden to possess ships of over 10,000 tons or submarines of any size. The justification for German disarmament was "to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations,"^[16] but as the years went by and Europe did not disarm to German levels, the double standard embedded in the treaty became increasingly evident.

Worse than being held to another standard, however, was Germany's actual defenselessness against its neighbors. This had been proven in 1923 when Germany fell behind in reparations payments, and the French army invaded and occupied the Ruhr region, allowing French soldiers to mine German coal and cut German timber in lieu of cash payment. Germany had reason to fear its eastern neighbors, as well. In 1933, the year Hitler came to power, Germany's army was roughly 27 percent the size of Poland's and 47 percent the size of Czechoslovakia's. Poland had 700 military aircraft, Czechoslovakia had 546, while Germany had none.^[17] According to Richard J. Evans, "Continued restrictions on Germany's armaments seemed unfair and absurd to many, especially in the face of belligerently nationalist and authoritarian governments in countries like Hungary and Poland."^[18]

Thus it came as no surprise when, in March 1935, Hitler openly flouted the Versailles Treaty by revealing that Germany had been secretly rearming and already had an air force of 2,500 planes and an army of 300,000 soldiers, soon to be increased by conscription to 550,000. France and Britain, the only two nations that could realistically have intervened to prevent rearmament, had already accepted the justice—and the inevitability—of Germany's recovery of the ability to defend itself. The German people, for their part, did not see rearmament as threatening their neighbors but simply as "wiping out the 'shameful peace'

of Versailles and restoring German honour.”^[19]“The strong Wehrmacht, so it was claimed and so it seemed to most Germans, was justifiable and necessary in order to put the nation once again on the same footing as its former wartime enemies and to provide a powerful base for diplomatic negotiation with the western democracies which, it was widely felt, continued to form a threat to national security.”^[20]

Hitler next turned to the Rhineland, a strip of land on the French border which had been declared by the Versailles Treaty to be permanently demilitarized: no armed soldier could set foot there; no fortifications could be built. In March 1936, Hitler sent twelve infantry and eight artillery battalions into the Rhineland. In this case, France reacted with alarm, until it was told that Britain would not help to enforce the treaty. Besides, both France and Britain realized that it was inevitable that Germany would one day recover its sovereign right to move troops within its own territory. England had expected Hitler to negotiate the change rather than risk war.^[21] But once the choice was between war and giving in to a reasonable demand, Britain chose to be reasonable and to continue to choose appeasement over confrontation. Indeed, British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, actually welcomed the opportunity to come to terms with Hitler.^[22]

Meanwhile, in Germany, the population was jubilant.^[23] In *The Hitler Myth*, Ian Kershaw quotes a German observer: “Those who still have objections to the person of the Führer or his foreign policy have shrunk in number to an insignificant group.” Kershaw adds, “The population in general, however, knew nothing of the actual reflections of Hitler and the German leadership on future German aggression and imperialist intentions.”^[24]

Two years later Hitler overturned the Versailles settlement regarding Austria. In 1919, in the name of self-determination of peoples, the victors at Versailles had shorn Austria of its empire, leaving it a small, land-locked, German-speaking nation. Had a plebiscite been held, Austrians would almost certainly have chosen to become a part of Germany, but this was explicitly forbidden by the Versailles Treaty. In March 1938, Hitler engineered the takeover of the Austrian government by his protégés, who immediately called for the unification of the two countries. German troops crossed the border, and Austria was absorbed into the Third Reich.

Here, again, the Versailles Treaty was violated, but here again the injustice of the treaty was widely recognized. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain objected only to the

occupation of Austria by the German army; the unification of the two countries seemed a natural to him. Chamberlain declared to the British Cabinet's Foreign Policy Committee that "the policy was the right one and he only regretted that it had not been adopted earlier."^[25] In Germany, the first reaction was "intense fear about the outbreak of a new war," but Hitler's success "took admiration for the Führer onto a new plane."^[26]

No sooner was this completed than Hitler turned to yet another contradiction in the Versailles settlement. When the victors dismantled the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they had to decide what to do with the Sudeten Mountains, a territory on the eastern border of Germany with a predominantly German population. Without holding a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the people who lived there, the Allies attached the region to the new nation of Czechoslovakia. After Hitler came to power in Germany, Sudeten Nazis took over the Sudeten German Party and began to clamor for unification with Germany. Recognizing that the Versailles Treaty had violated the principle of national self-determination, Neville Chamberlain, in 1937, resolved to "press the Czechoslovak government to satisfy the grievances of Germans inside Czechoslovakia."^[27]

After a crisis in May 1938, Chamberlain, alarmed that the continent might descend into war merely to deny self-determination to the Sudeten Germans, pressured France to abrogate its treaty with Czechoslovakia. Then, at the Munich Conference of September 29, 1938—famous as the height (or depth) of appeasement—Britain and France negotiated a settlement with Hitler that would allow Germany to occupy the predominantly German regions of the Sudetenland and hold plebiscites where the desire to unite with Germany was in doubt.

Once again, Hitler had moved forward on his mission to dominate Europe under the cover of revising an unjust provision of the Versailles Treaty. Once again, the German people were oblivious to Hitler's long-term plan for predatory war. What Munich meant to them was Hitler's ability to revise the Versailles Treaty *without* recourse to war. According to Ian Kershaw, the Munich settlement provided Hitler "with 'almost legendary standing' among the German people; and every opponent of the regime was disarmed, every basis of criticism removed. All reports from the days following the Munich Settlement reflect the new wave of relief, admiration, and gratitude which now poured out for Hitler."^[28]

The anti-war spirit of the German people is also revealed by the fact that Neville Chamberlain was more widely cheered in Germany than Adolf Hitler. Paul O. Schmidt,

Hitler's interpreter at the Munich Conference, later recalled that "Chamberlain was warmly welcomed at Munich. He was the hero of the German people on that occasion. ... The German masses gave flowers to Chamberlain. One could see on their faces that they thanked Chamberlain for saving the peace of Europe despite Hitler."^[29] Moreover, William L. Shirer, reporting from Berlin, recalled that the German public refused to watch and cheer a military procession down the Wilhelmstrasse. Shirer called it "the most striking demonstration against war I've ever seen." He added, "Hitler stood there, and there weren't two hundred people in the street or the great square of the Wilhelmsplatz. Hitler looked grim, then angry, and soon went inside, leaving his troops to parade by unreviewed. What I've seen tonight almost rekindles a little faith in the German people. They are dead set against war."^[30]

Hitler's next step, the invasion and dismemberment of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, was also facilitated by the Versailles Treaty. Czechoslovakia, created at Versailles in 1919, was not a historic nation-state, but an amalgamation of peoples, each of whom aspired to nation-state status by way either of independence (in the case of the Slovaks) or by joining neighboring co-nationals. Besides the 3.2 million Germans in the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia's population of 14.7 million people included 7.4 million Czechs (barely 50% of the population), 2.3 million Slovaks, 700,000 Magyars, and 600,000 Ruthenes.^[31] As a consequence, nationalist resentment ran high. There was a strong separatist movement within Slovakia, Poland wanted to annex the predominantly Polish Teschen district, and Hungary wanted southern Slovakia with its Magyar majority.

The opportunity for action was presented to Czechoslovakia's enemies in March 1939 when Czech President Emil Hacha, attempting to squelch further secessionist movements, dismissed the governments of Slovakia and Ruthenia and declared martial law. Slovakia appealed to Hitler, and the German army invaded under the cover of upholding the principle of national-self-determination. Germany annexed the Czech regions (Bohemia and Moravia), Slovakia declared its independence, while Poland seized Teschen, and Hungary absorbed southern Slovakia and Ruthenia.

Playing into Hitler's Hand

It was this dismemberment of Czechoslovakia that ended appeasement. Neville

Chamberlain, shocked and humiliated that he had believed Hitler's promise not to annex any territory after the Sudetenland, now gave in to the alarm expressed by Churchill and others and decided that appeasement had failed. What really failed, however, was Chamberlain's nerve and imagination. The invasion and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by Germany, Poland, and Hungary was certainly a shocking and violent act. But the fact that Poland and Hungary shared in the aggression, and that they did so on the basis of national self-determination, suggests that the historical process that was occurring was the continued revision of the Versailles Treaty. While there were increasing grounds to suspect Hitler's motives, there was no prima facie case for threatening war. Yet this is precisely what Chamberlain did. Giving up appeasement for the new strategy of deterrence, Chamberlain announced Britain's unilateral commitment to defend what he knew would be Hitler's next object: Poland.

In 1919, when Poland had been restored to the map of Europe as a sovereign state, it was given an outlet to the sea, the Danzig Corridor, a strip of land which was transferred from Germany to Poland and which separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The German city of Danzig was declared a "free city" independence of Germany and supervised by Poland. No German government after 1919 accepted the loss of Danzig. In January 1939, Hitler demanded that Danzig be administered by Germany and that Germany be allowed to control a highway and railroad line linking Germany with East Prussia. He promised to guarantee the German-Polish border as drawn at Versailles, offered to extend the 1934 Non-Aggression pact for twenty-five more years, and invited Poland to join the Anti-Comintern coalition.

Had Hitler's demands regarding Poland been made at the beginning of his attempt to overturn the Versailles settlement, rather than the end, a compromise would have been likely. The Poles, themselves, did not expect that the status quo could be preserved. They had, in fact, built a new port at Gdynia, not far from Danzig, precisely so they would have a Polish port in the event that Danzig was reclaimed by Germany.^[32] Moreover, Polish Foreign Minister Josef Beck "already considered the city a 'lost post' in 1938, though he would never say so publicly."^[33] The British government also considered that these demands were reasonable. Even while it was using the threat of war in the spring of 1939 to guarantee Poland against German aggression, "the British cabinet agreed that the guarantee would only come into effect if the Poles did not show 'provocative or stupid obstinacy' in

the face of German demands for the return of Danzig and the Polish Corridor.”^[34]

In the summer of 1939, however, the Polish government did indeed choose to be obstinate. For them it was not Hitler’s specific demands (as already noted, the Poles were ready to concede Danzig and German access to East Prussia), it was the principle. They believed that this would only be the first of more demands, and that war might as well come sooner rather than later. Moreover, Neville Chamberlain had come to much the same conclusion. Britain unilaterally guaranteed the territorial integrity of Poland, thus encouraging the Polish government to deny Hitler’s demands. Hitler now had what he wanted: he could begin his long-anticipated war of conquest while representing it to the German people as the revision of the last injustice imposed upon them at Versailles.

One other factor now came into play. Before declaring war on Poland, Hitler had to come to terms with the Soviet Union. In the era of appeasement, the Soviet Union had supported the Versailles system. It joined the League of Nations in 1934, actively promoted the idea of collective security in the 1930s, and had mobilized its army in support of Czechoslovakia in both Sudeten crises. If Stalin chose to join Britain in the Polish crisis, Hitler would face a two-front war. Moreover, the Polish army was not inconsiderable, and the conquest of Poland would not be an easy task. By forming an alliance with Stalin, Hitler would kill two birds with one stone: he could both end the Soviet commitment to collective security and gain the support of the Red Army in the conquest of Poland.

Ironically, the Versailles Treaty was also of significance in making such a Nazi-Soviet alliance possible. In the aftermath of World War I, with the collapse of the Austrian, German, and Russian empires, many of the peoples of these empires declared their independence, including Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine. The Versailles Treaty did not establish national boundaries, nor did the League of Nations promote peaceful resolutions of the conflicts that arose. Of particular importance was the Russo-Polish War of 1919-1920, in the course of which Poland captured and annexed the western regions of Ukraine and Belorussia. After the Soviet Union emerged as a reconstituted Russian Empire, it was inevitable that elements in its foreign-policy establishment would be interested in regaining those lost lands.

Josef Stalin, who by the 1930s had emerged as the ruler of the Soviet Union, remains enigmatic and controversial. He is alternately seen as a sincere proponent of collective

security against fascism, a Communist ideologue, an opportunist, and an aggressive war-planner.^[35] For the purposes of this paper, however, those questions do not need resolution. No matter what his motives, Stalin took advantage of the opportunities presented him by the end of appeasement. The turn to deterrence meant preparations for war, and in the summer of 1939 both Britain and Germany negotiated with Soviet Russia to gain its support. Hitler offered the better deal. In the event of a German attack on Poland from the West, the Red Army would invade from the East, and the Soviet Union could regain the territories that the Russian Empire had lost in the aftermath of World War I. On August 28, 1939, the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed. Three days later, Hitler ordered the full-scale invasion of Poland. Two days after that, Britain and France declared war on Germany, and the most destructive war in the history of the world began.

The Failure of Conventional Wisdom

Given the utter horror that Hitler unleashed upon Europe—predatory aggression, war against civilians, the Holocaust, and other genocides and eugenocides—there has been a natural tendency to condemn appeasement as a patently failed policy. The logic can be summarized thus: Perhaps the Versailles Treaty was unjust, and perhaps Hitler's demands were reasonable, superficially, nevertheless European statespeople should have seen (as the government of Poland did) that Hitler was not simply revising the treaty but initiating a campaign for the enslavement of Europe. The emotion can be summarized this way: Criminals should not be allowed to get off on technicalities or twist the law to condone crime. In short, conventional wisdom holds that, in the real world of the 1930s, given that the Versailles Treaty was not revised, and the psychopathic author of *Mein Kampf* did in fact come to power in Germany, it was wrong not to use force to stop him. Evil should have been nipped in the bud.

Conventional wisdom is wrong on two counts. First, it should take very little imagination to realize that a Winston Churchill-esque policy of trying to nip evil in the bud was not a way to peace. An Anglo-French preemptive invasion of Germany in the mid-1930s would have prevented a disaster that we know about only after the fact, while in the real world of the 1930s, such a war would only have exacerbated an unjust international system. We must not lose sight of the fact that Adolf Hitler was a popular leader precisely because he was seen by the German people as revising the terms of an unjust treaty. As noted above, after he

came to power Hitler kept his expansionary plans to himself (and his generals). They were not aware of his expansionary plans. It is inconceivable that at any time between 1933 and 1939 Germany would have welcomed French and British soldiers who invaded their country, toppled their government, and removed their leader.^[36] It is impossible to imagine a positive outcome to such an invasion, and we can be certain that it would not have been peaceful. Furthermore, such a war would not have gone down in history as the “Good War.” The experience of invading, defeating, and occupying a resentful nation would *not* linger in the memory of the victorious nations as one of their finest hours. The conquered peoples could *not* be expected to realize the guilt of their leaders, accept defeat and occupation, make friends with their invaders, and work with the occupiers to make a peaceful Europe. In short, such a war would not have been a war of good against evil. It would have been a war to preserve an unjust international order.

Second, it is important to realize that the policy of appeasement did not in fact fail. It was deterrence that failed. War was guaranteed in March 1939 when Neville Chamberlain abandoned appeasement and announced that Great Britain would go to war to defend Poland. This was a mistake. Appeasement had consistently succeeded in denying Hitler the war he wanted, and there are a number of reasons to believe that continued appeasement could have prevented not just World War II but the Holocaust.

In the first place, Hitler’s own actions suggest that he did his best to provoke a policy of deterrence and that he feared appeasement. We know that he wanted war to begin over an issue that was popular with the German people. He felt cheated by Chamberlain at Munich, because, to the joy of the Germans, Chamberlain had averted war. We also know that in the run-up to the invasion of Poland, Hitler was very careful to appear to the German people to be pursuing only a reasonable revision to the Versailles Treaty. At nine o’clock in the evening on August 31, German radio broadcast a sixteen-point proposal to Poland for a peaceful settlement. William Shirer recorded in his diary that the points included “(1) Return of Danzig to Germany; (2) A plebiscite to determine who shall have the Corridor; (3) An exchange of minority populations.” Shirer noted, “I was taken aback by their reasonableness.”^[37]

At the same time, Hitler took care to prevent both British and Polish leaders from accepting his demands. In the last meeting between the German Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop and the British Ambassador Nevile Henderson on August 29, Ribbentrop read a list of

demands so quickly that they could not be written down. Moreover, Hitler had instructed Ribbentrop not to turn over the written list.^[38] Then, shortly before the sixteen-point proposal was read over German radio, Hitler ordered that the telephone line to Warsaw be cut. The Polish government could not have accepted the demands, even if it had wanted to. This suggests that Hitler knew that this was his last chance to mobilize public opinion by using the Versailles Treaty. If Hitler was afraid that appeasement might prevent war, should not we also consider the possibility?

Secondly, there is good reason to suspect that postponing the war might also have prevented it. We must not assume that Hitler did, in fact, have a preconceived plan to launch the drive to the East that he described in *Mein Kampf*. In what is recognized as the most impartial and evenhanded survey of Europe's road to war, P. M. H. Bell evaluates and dismisses the two extremes: that Hitler worked according to a premeditated blueprint for war or that he was an improviser with no definite plan. Bell takes as most reasonable the interpretation of Allan Bullock in his classic work *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*: "Even in a chapter firmly entitled 'Hitler's War,' Bullock described how the dictator hesitated between three courses: another Munich; a war against Poland alone; or a war against Poland which might involved France and Britain. He did not make up his mind until the British government made it up for him by declaring war."^[39] In other words, the situation in Europe in 1939 was highly contingent. Chamberlain's actions were as important as Hitler's in shaping the outcome.

Thirdly, holding consistently to the principles of appeasement and appeasing Hitler in regard to his demands on Poland would have brought a sea change to international affairs in Europe. It would have been the final revision of the Versailles Treaty, correcting Germany's last perceived injury. From this point on, any military drive to implement Hitler's plan to win lebensraum in the East would have been seen unequivocally by Germans and their neighbors alike as unprovoked, predatory aggression. Of equal importance, appeasement would have assured that Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany remained enemies. The Nazi-Soviet Pact was contingent on Britain's abandonment of appeasement. Had war not been made inevitable by Britain's unilateral guarantee to Poland, Stalin would not have felt the need to choose sides. Without that Nazi-Soviet Pact, a German invasion of Poland would have been far from certain. Moreover, had the Poles appeased Hitler by accepting his January 1939 demands, Poland would have joined the Anti-Comintern Pact, and thus become an enemy of the Soviet Union.

It is also of great importance to note that, even though the standard criticism of appeasement implies that it allowed the Holocaust to occur, in fact the opposite is the case. Appeasement postponed the Holocaust. Hitler was as sensitive to German public opinion in regard to his plans to remove Jews from Europe as to his plans to launch an aggressive and predatory war eastward. He preferred to use legal methods to isolate the Jews at first. Moreover, the original Nazi plan was to force the Jews to emigrate.^[40] While it is true that Nazi policies toward Jews became increasingly cruel over time, physical extermination of Jews did not begin until after the war had begun. Indeed there is a clear parallel between Hitler's plans for war and his plans for removing the Jews from Germany. Although they were clearly elements of his fundamental intellectual make-up, Hitler did not have a preconceived plan for implementing either of them. The path to Auschwitz was full of twists and turns, and it appears that the decision for the Final Solution probably was taken in 1941.^[41]

Not only was the Holocaust a generally contingent event, it was specifically contingent on war. In a recent authoritative survey of the topic, Doris L. Bergen has asserted that "War provided killers with both a cover and an excuse for murder; in wartime, killing was normalized, and extreme, even genocidal measures, could be justified with familiar arguments about the need to defend the homeland. Without the war, the holocaust would not—and could not—have happened."^[42] If this is true, then continued appeasement of Hitler would have continued to postpone the Holocaust, just as it postponed the war.

I cannot, of course, pretend to have proved that Hitler would not have ultimately forced war on Europe, but I do insist that war was not the predetermined outcome of Hitler's rise to power. There is simply no way of knowing what would have happened next had Chamberlain pressured the Poles to appease Hitler as he had the Czechs. Perhaps Hitler could have forced a second world war, perhaps not. I do insist, however, that appeasement would have been worth the gamble, even if it had ultimately failed. It is hard to imagine an outcome worse than a war that left sixty million dead and Europe in ruins. As A. J. P. Taylor famously observed,

In 1938 Czechoslovakia was betrayed. In 1939 Poland was saved. Less than one hundred thousand Czechs died during the war. Six and a half million Poles were killed. Which was better—to be a betrayed Czech or a saved Pole?^[43]

It is time for journalists, historians, soldiers, and U.S. Presidents to abandon, once and for

all, the delusion that the road to World War II proves that international threats should be stopped forcefully and quickly. In reality, the opposite is suggested. The rise of Hitler shows that unjust international settlements foster militant extremism. While it would be better to correct injustice before it bears its evil fruit, the only practicable policy is to appease potential war-makers by making reasonable concessions. As long as appeasement was followed in the 1930s, it prevented war. Deterrence hastened war rather than preventing it, and preventive war could not have had a peaceful outcome. Only when the next international threat to peace is greeted with the propositions “if you want peace, work for justice” and “there is no way to peace, peace is the way” will the true lessons of World War II have been learned.

1. 1. This paper began as an exchange of views between the author and Dr. Adam Stanley of the University of Wisconsin--Platteville. The author wishes to thank Dr. Stanley for his stimulating alternate perspective and the UWP History Club for sponsoring the event. In its next incarnation, the paper was delivered to a session of the Peace and Justice Studies Association/Wisconsin Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies joint conference in October 2009, and the author thanks the audience for their comments. Finally, it was improved even more by the helpful critique offered by the anonymous reviewers, to whom the author is very grateful. The deficiencies that remain are the sole responsibility of the author.
2. 2. Two recent books that call into question the notion that the Allies fought a “good” war against Germany are Norman Davies, *No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945* (New York: Penguin, 2006), and William I. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
3. 3. The appeasers, of course, are not without their defenders. It has long been recognized that the leaders of Britain and France were so constrained by their historical circumstances that they could hardly have acted otherwise. Their home populations were deeply fearful of war, their resources were overstretched, and Hitler’s initial demands were not unreasonable. Yet, despite the sense that military action in the early 1930s is inconceivable, as historians recount each successive concession to Hitler, their regret at “what might have been” becomes more

pronounced. Appeasement may be understandable, they imply, but it is deeply regrettable. Hitler should have been stopped early and decisively.

4. 4. Jeffrey Record gives an excellent summary of evocations of Hitler by U.S. presidents, secretaries of defense, and neo-conservative foreign policy advisers in *Appeasement Reconsidered: Investigating the Mythology of the 1930s* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005), 1-6. Record explains the reasons for appeasement but he does not defend it. Moreover, he does not deny the justice of any of the wars America has justified on the grounds that threats must be “nipped in the bud,” but he finds unfortunate the use of the “Munich analogy.” He concludes, “If the 1930s reveal the danger of underestimating a security threat, the post-World War II decades contain examples of the danger of overestimating a security threat.” (46).
5. 5. Richard Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, revised and updated edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 26.
6. 6. Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 122.
7. 7. R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 12.
8. 8. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 615.
9. 9. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933-1939*, 615-17.
10. 10. P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2007), 21.
11. 11. Sidney Aster, “‘Guilty Men:’ The Case of Neville Chamberlain,” in *The Origins of the Second World War*, edited by Patrick Finney (London: Arnold, 1997), 64.
12. 12. Paul Kennedy quoted in *Appeasement Reconsidered*, by Jeffrey Record and Army War College (Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), 9-10.
13. 13. Peter Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement: The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), 6.
14. 14. For France, see Anthony Adamthwaite, “France and the Coming of War,” and for Britain see R. A. C. Parker, “Alternatives to Appeasement,” in *The Origins of the Second World War*, edited by Patrick Finney (London: Arnold, 1997).
15. 15. R. J. Q. Adams, *British Politics and Foreign Policy in the Age of Appeasement, 1935-39* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), chapter two.

16. 16. “The Versailles Treaty, June 28, 1919: Part IV,” Yale Law School, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partv.asp>.
17. 17. League of Nations, *Armaments Year-Book* (Geneva: May 1933), 161, 163, 293, 554, 555. Poland had 90 infantry regiments, 40 cavalry regiments, and 42 artillery regiments. Czechoslovakia had 53 infantry regiments, 11 cavalry regiments, and 34 artillery regiments. Germany had only 21 infantry regiments, 18 cavalry regiments, and 7 artillery regiments.
18. 18. Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, 617.
19. 19. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 71.
20. 20. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 123.
21. 21. Many historians have looked back at this event as the great missed opportunity to stop Hitler, especially since Albert Speer, Hitler’s Minister of Armaments said that the German army would have retreated if France and Britain had taken action. P. M. H. Bell, however, says that “In the words of the most authoritative German account, this assumption is ‘altogether unfounded.’” Intervention against Hitler would have meant war (Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 240, 242). Bell’s reference is to Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *The Build-up of German Aggression, Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 431.
22. 22. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 62.
23. 23. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 126.
24. 24. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,”
25. 25. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 133.
26. 26. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 130.
27. 27. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, 140.
28. 28. Kershaw, “Hitler Myth,” 138.
29. 29. Quoted in Record, *Appeasement Reconsidered*, 28.
30. 30. William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* (New York: Knopf, 1941), 143.
31. 31. Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, 27.
32. 32. Overy, *Road to War*, 2-3.
33. 33. Overy, *Road to War*, 11.

34. 34. Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, 690.
35. 35. The case of Stalin as a proponent of collective security is defended by Teddy Uldricks in “Soviet Security Policy in the 1930s,” *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991: A Retrospective*, edited by Gabriel Gorodetsky (London: Frank Cass, 1994). The argument that Stalin’s intentions were aggressive and not defensive has been made by R. C. Raack in “Stalin’s Plans for World War II,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 2 (April 1991): 215-227. An in-depth, judicious account can be found in Silvio Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).
36. 36. This is not to say that no one would have welcomed a Western invasion to impose regime change. Jews, Roma, members of the Communist Party, would no doubt have been glad to be liberated. Yet it must also be recognized that any help they gave to such invaders would only seem to confirm the slanders already being spread about them by the Nazis. The question of the Holocaust will be addressed at the end of this paper.
37. 37. William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary, 192-193*. As we have seen, neither Britain nor Poland thought they were unreasonable.
38. 38. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 507.
39. 39. Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, 48.
40. 40. Donald L. Niewyk and Francis R. Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 7.
41. 41. For a recent summing up of the historical consensus, see “Hitler’s Role in the ‘Final Solution,’” in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (Jerusalem: International Institute for Holocaust Research; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
42. 42. Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), vii.
43. 43. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), xxxvii.