

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56861-6 - The Origins of the First and Second World Wars

Frank McDonough

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The origins of the First and Second World Wars

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521568616

© Cambridge University Press 1997

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First published 1997
10th printing 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-56861-6 paperback

Map illustrations by Kathy Baxendale

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cover, *L'Enfer* (Hell), 1916, by Georges Paul Leroux (1877–1957), Imperial War Museum (Bridgeman Art Library); 9, Punch Publications; 50, 81, Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent, Canterbury; 110, Peter Newark's Military Pictures

Contents

Introduction	1
1 The origins of the First World War, 1871–1914	3
The rise of Germany	3
The impact of imperialism	6
Kaiser Wilhelm, German world policy and German aims	8
The drift towards alliances	10
The Balkan Crisis, 1912–14	13
1914: the July Crisis and decisions for war	15
<i>Document case study</i>	19
2 The historians and the origins of the First World War	24
War guilt: the changing debate	24
Germany and the origins of war: Fritz Fischer and his critics	25
The nature of the international system: alliances and diplomacy	33
War by timetable? Militarism, armaments and war plans	33
Nationalism	35
An imperialist war? Marxist and economic explanations	36
3 The origins of the Second World War: 1 War and the fragile peace, 1914–33	43
The ordeal of war, 1914–18	43
The Paris Peace Settlement and its consequences	46
The League of Nations and the limits of international co-operation, 1919–33	54
The ‘German problem’ during the 1920s	55
The Great Depression and its consequences	61
<i>Document case study</i>	65
4 The origins of the Second World War: 2 From peace to global war, 1933–41	69
The impact of Hitler	69
The collapse of the League of Nations, 1935–37	71
Neville Chamberlain, appeasement and the road to Munich, 1937–38	73
The road to global war, 1938–41	78
<i>Document case study</i>	83

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

5 The historians and the origins of the Second World War	90
The changing debate	90
The Hitler factor	91
The role of Neville Chamberlain and appeasement	94
French foreign policy and the coming of war	96
Mussolini's role in the origins of the Second World War	97
The Soviet Union and the origins of the Second World War	99
The Paris Peace Settlement and its consequences	102
Economic interpretations	103
The role of ideology	105
The debate over the origins of the Asian-Pacific conflict	107
Select bibliography	116
Chronology	118
Index	122

Introduction

The two world wars of the twentieth century never cease to arouse emotion, capture the public imagination and provoke a lively historical debate. The First World War (1914–18), largely a European conflict, left over 8 million combatants dead and was dubbed by contemporaries as the ‘war to end all wars’. The Second World War (1939–45), a truly global conflict, left over 45 million dead, and evokes the dreadful images of the Holocaust and Hiroshima. It is usual for the origins of these two world wars to be examined separately. However, this book examines them in a single volume, which aims to provide a detailed analysis of the key events leading to both wars, an original and wide-ranging examination of the historical debate surrounding them, and a wide selection of primary documents on major issues. It is not the purpose of this book to provide a new theory on the origins of the wars, nor to examine the wars in comparative terms, but it is hoped that the reader will seek out elements of continuity, explore comparisons, and evaluate the different interpretations and counter-interpretations which are considered during the course of this study.

Any exploration of the origins of war must keep in mind several important factors. Power lies at the heart of nearly every explanation of why nations go to war. The influence of powerful leaders, their aims, policies and decisions are crucial to any discussion of the origins of war. A harsh or lenient peace treaty is a further factor which can promote peace or encourage war. There is a clear link between a breakdown of diplomacy and the outbreak of war. However, the most crucial factor in promoting war or peace is the prevailing balance of power between nations. It is clear that an ineffective balance of power encourages war, and a rough equilibrium of power between nations is an aid to peace. Even so, the origins of the First and Second World Wars are viewed here as unique, growing out of a particular set of circumstances, which cannot be explained by reference to any one single theory or factor.

The discussion which follows is structured in the following way. The first two chapters deal with the origins of the First World War. Chapter 1 sets the origins of the First World War in the context of long-term developments, most notably the rise of Germany, the surge of imperialism, the growth of alliances and the spread of nationalism, and relates how these underlying factors influenced the July Crisis of 1914. Chapter 2 provides an original and extensive analysis of the changing nature of the historical debate on the origins of the First World War. The final three chapters concentrate on the origins of the

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[More information](#)

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Second World War. Chapter 3 provides a detailed exploration of the evolution of international affairs from 1914 to 1933. In Chapter 4, the unfolding global crisis from 1933 to 1941, when Germany, Italy and Japan undermined the peace settlement, is fully explored. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a critical survey of the vast historical debate on the origins of the Second World War, including a detailed exploration of all the key problem areas.

The book also contains three in-depth document case studies, using a wide range of primary documents, on the July Crisis of 1914, the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and key events leading to the Second World War. In addition, there is a detailed set of notes and references which are designed to indicate more detailed sources on a wide range of important issues, as well as a useful bibliography.