Introduction

Hitler's War?

What was World War II about? This is a question which is related to – but not quite the same as – 'Why did World War II start?' For many people in Europe and America there is a standard narrative of the war. This is built around the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler or, in a rather broader version, around an extended German attempt to assert hegemony over Europe. This standard narrative begins with Hitler's and Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939. 'Hitler's war' is certainly a thick strand of the story, and 'Germany's war' gives that strand more bulk, but there were other strands to the mid-century world crisis. World War II was also not simply a defence of liberal democracy (a cause exemplified by President Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' and the Allied Atlantic Charter). If the label 'totalitarian' means anything, it can be applied as much to Stalin's USSR as to Hitler's Germany, and on the other hand, the term hardly fits the Japanese case. The Nationalist China of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) was hardly a democracy. Of course, the war *was* a struggle for 'freedom' against 'totalitarianism' for many of the participants, and in the end the happy outcome of the conflict (for some) strengthened a version of liberal democracy. But Allied victory did not make liberal democracy a global norm.

World War II was also not in essence only a war for decolonisation and national liberation, although that strand existed – paradoxically – in both Japanese and Chinese propaganda, and the end of formal imperialism was one indirect outcome of the global struggle. Nevertheless empires of a new type arose after 1945. Another strand was a 'race war' between (or against) ethnic groups, in the sense not only of the

terrible and unique Nazi 'war against the Jews', but also of the struggle between 'Germanic' peoples and Slavs, and in Asia between 'Europeans' and 'non-Europeans'. 'Racial' assumptions played a remarkably large part in top-level war planning for both sides.

The New Order and the Old

If we really want to look at the war from the broadest perspective, then Axis war aims need to be taken at face value. The simplest but most fundamental expression of those aims was in the treaty that formally created the Axis 'alliance', the Tripartite Pact (the *Dreimächtepakt*). This was signed publicly in Berlin in September 1940 and included the following statement of aims:

> The governments of Germany, Italy and Japan, consider it as a prerequisite of a lasting peace that each nation of the world receive the space [*Raum*] to which it is entitled. They have, therefore, decided to stand by and co-operate with one another in regard to their efforts in the greater East Asia space and in the European region respectively wherein it is their prime purpose to establish and maintain a new order of things [*eine neue Ordnung*] calculated to promote the mutual prosperity and welfare of the peoples concerned.[1]

The talk of 'lasting peace' was deeply hypocritical. The pressure for a global 'new order of things', however, was an essential concept for understanding the unstable global system before and during the war.

A new order presupposes an old order, an existing international system. 'Existing' is perhaps a better adjective than 'old', because I locate the 'order' in question, not very originally, in quite recent events: the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919 and the Washington Treaties of 1921–2. (Both sets of treaties will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 1.) The Paris treaties (especially the Treaty of Versailles) blamed Germany for World War I, burdened it with financial reparations, and stripped it of territory and colonies. Hitler and many other Germans raged against the Versailles *Diktat*. But there was more to the 1919 Paris treaties than this. The treaties also reordered Central Europe after the collapse of Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey (and, implicitly, after the crisis of the Russian Empire brought about by the Bolshevik Revolution); an international order was created based, however imperfectly, on the principles of ethnic self-determination. The Paris treaties also perpetuated the advantageous pre-1914 geopolitical and economic position of the British Empire and France, both in Europe and in the world as a whole. They provided a mechanism, the League of Nations, by which that status quo was to be maintained. Italy and Japan, as Allied powers in 1918, benefited from the Paris treaties: Italy won territory from Austria-Hungary and Turkey, and the Japanese received many of the German Pacific colonies. But Britain and France took much more.

What the Paris treaties were for Europe the Washington treaties were for Asia. The agreements signed in Washington in 1921–2 guaranteed the post-1918 status quo in Asia and the balance of naval forces there. The Western countries (especially Britain) and Japan would keep their Asian colonies, but China would henceforth be guaranteed as a national state, and outside powers were not to seize any more of its territory. There was even more wishful thinking here than in the European treaties, as China was in a condition of great turmoil, especially following the abdication in 1912 of the child emperor, the last of his line.

Fifteen years later, in the 1930s, the future Axis powers envisaged the overturn of this existing Paris/Washington global order. The leaders of these states had considerable public support for their challenge to the system. This was based in part on the broadly perceived unfairness of the actual treaties. It also came from a heightened sense of national priorities, with the rise of extreme and mass-based nationalist parties. Also important was the vulnerability of the international economic system, the apparent decadence of the 'old order' great powers (and the USA), and the peril of Soviet Communism. All these things were revealed or enhanced by the global economic Depression that began in the late 1920s.

World War II itself eventually lined up those states that wanted to defend the old order – a group which, surprisingly, eventually included Stalin's USSR – against those that wanted to completely challenge it, the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots'. In the end, in 1945, the term 'a new world order' was used by American commentators – fifty years before President George Bush Sr employed it – to describe a world quite different from what had been expected either by the 'Versailles powers' or by the advocates of the Axis 'new order'. This 'new world order' was not the cause for which various states went to war in 1937–41, nor was it an order of things which the chief beneficiaries, the United States and the USSR, had really expected in the late 1930s.

Context and Perspective

Whichever strand is followed, and however the relationship between the old order and the new is interpreted, historical context is extremely important. The war cannot be understood without bearing in mind developments of the fifty years before it began, especially the completion of the European empires, the rise of mass politics in Europe and America, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the Great Depression. These are outlined in Chapter 1. And this is also a book looking back across eighty years. The Cold War has ended, the Soviet Union and its satellite system have broken up, Communism is finished as an international force, Germany has been reunified and Yugoslavia shattered. China and perhaps India have emerged as superpowers. The place of World War II in the history of the twentieth century is clearer. The final

chapter (Chapter 14) will look at the extent to which the world after 1945 was 'made' by the war years, and the extent to which it was different from what had gone before. This is not just a new history of World War II for millennials, although there may be parallels for them. It may come as a surprise that terms like 'ethnic cleansing', 'regime change', 'clash of civilisations', 'weapons of mass destruction', 'new world order', 'martyrdom', 'populism', 'economic nationalism', and 'fake news' had a relevance for the 1930s and 1940s as much as for the century which followed.

Another current term which has great relevance now and then is 'globalisation' (and anti-globalisation). As a historian, rather than a social scientist, this is not a concept with which I am wholly comfortable. A textbook definition is 'the process of increasing interconnectedness between societies such that events in one part of the world more and more have effects on peoples and societies far away'.[2] To historians, globalisation has been going on since the 1500s. We might argue that in World War II the 'new order' powers did not want (as a realistic medium-term goal) to establish global domination. They were more nationalists than globalists. What they wanted was an intermediate state of regional hegemony ('the space to which [each nation] is entitled', to quote the Tripartite Pact). They were, with hindsight, 'premature anti-globalists'. The 'old order' powers, too, were defending their own (imperial) kind of regionalism.

Europe and Asia

But the larger point is that the challenge to the old order, and the war that followed that challenge, was global in scale. A basic argument of this book is that the war in Asia (and the Pacific) was as important as the war in Europe. The Asian war does not fit easily into the 'rise and fall of Hitler' narrative. The concept of the 'new order' was used by the Japanese Prime Minister Prince Konoe in an important statement of December 1938: 'Japan, China, and Manchukuo [a Japanese puppet state in north-eastern China] will be united by the common aim of establishing a new order in East Asia and of realising a relationship of neighbourly amity, common defence against Communism, and economic co-operation.'[3] It is true that Nazi Germany's drive for hegemony in Europe was not *caused* by the (earlier) crisis in Asia – except in the sense that Hitler hoped Britain's resistance would be weakened by Japanese threats to its empire in Asia. And it is also true that Japan would not have attacked Britain and America in December 1941 without the stunning events in Europe – the German conquest of the Western European mainland and the Wehrmacht's early successes in the war against the USSR. But the Japanese also, and more fundamentally, would not have taken their decision to attack had they not been fighting a drawn-out, unwinnable war in China since 1937.

The intention is not so much to privilege Asia as to see World War II as a global whole, both in its causes and in the way in which it was fought. Again, the September 1940 Tripartite Pact, signed by Germany, Italy, and Japan, provides an important perspective. Without mentioning the USA by name, the Axis powers endeavoured to deter that country's entry into the war. Japan, Germany, and Italy undertook 'to assist one another with all political, economic, and military means' if one of them was 'attacked by a power at present not involved in the European war or in the Chinese–Japanese conflict'. President Franklin Roosevelt recognised the same holistic reality when he wrote to one of his diplomats in early 1941:

> I believe that the fundamental proposition is that we must recognize that the hostilities in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict. We must, consequently, recognize that our interests are menaced both in Europe and in the Far East. We are engaged in the task of defending our way of life and our vital national interests wherever they are seriously endangered. Our strategy of self-defense must be a global strategy.[4]

When Did World War II Begin?

Following on from the broad – global – geographical scope of this book is its chronological scope. If the war is taken to be as much Asian as European, and if it was in essence about the new order versus the old order, then it began in July 1937 and not in September 1939 (and not in June 1941 or December 1941). This is a history of what might be called the 'long' World War II (i.e. a war running from 1937 to 1945).

This early start requires a few words of justification. It is a fact that China and Japan were continuously at war from July 1937 until August 1945. While neither China nor Japan formally declared war in 1937 – Japan referred until 1941 to the China 'Incident' – in *real* terms one of the bloodiest conflicts of the twentieth century was taking place and would continue until after Hiroshima. In contrast, September 1939 was just a waystation in an existing global conflict. In that month 'only' Britain, France, Germany, and Poland entered a state of war, and their conflict was a regional war essentially confined to a small part of Europe. China and Japan had already been at war for two years, and Russia and America would not enter the war until 1941. As a more basic point, I start in 1937 because (as mentioned above) the war was about the challenge to a particular view of the world order, which applied to both Europe and Asia. The year 1937 saw the first full-scale armed challenge to that order by the Japanese. (Arguably this was the first armed *response* to such a challenge, by the Chinese leader Jiang Jieshi; further details are given in Chapter 2.)

If we are going back to 1937, why not go back to other armed struggles of the early and mid-1930s? Indeed why not see a thirty years war – for and against German

hegemony – from 1914 to 1945? This becomes something of a historical parlour game, and we have to draw up rules somewhere. The conflict in northeast China (Manchuria/Manchukuo) in 1931–2 and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935–6 were indeed challenges to the existing international order. My argument would be that these were events that had a beginning and an end, and that the end came before the continuous fighting of World War II. The course of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9 does fall within the dates of my extended 1937–45 time span. That war involved advisors and fighting 'volunteers' from a number of European countries – and even a few Americans. It was portrayed (like the later struggle in Europe) as a struggle between Fascism and democracy. However, the war in Spain was essentially an internal struggle and it was resolved, for better or worse, in April 1939, six months before the outbreak of open international armed conflict in the rest of Europe. Thereafter Spain (unlike China and Japan) would play no major direct part in the global conflict. Although this may sound like self-contradiction, I would also argue that the Soviet–Japanese border incidents of 1938 and 1939 (Lake Khasan and Khalkhin Gol) and the Soviet–Finnish War of 1939–40 *do* fall within the scope of World War II. This was true even though these conflicts came well before the German attack on the USSR in June 1941 and the beginning of the 'Great Patriotic War'. The justification is that they directly involved great powers, and the struggle would be resumed in later years.

Grand Strategy

A short book on big events needs to know its limits. I am setting out to give an overview of the war and indeed, in geographical terms, a rather broader overview than some other general histories have attempted. Inevitably it is a bird's-eye view. Many themes are left out – World War II as a direct human experience, the historiography and various national perceptions of the war, war and culture, the home front and the domestic implications of war. It is not that I consider these things uninteresting, irrelevant, or unimportant. Rather they are too complex to be dealt with adequately in a short book. This is also not a history of the world in the late 1930s and the 1940s; it is a history of World War II.

The eminent Danish historian of the European Resistance, Jörgen Hæstrup, once took the British military pundit Basil Liddell Hart to task for his approach to history. Liddell Hart was the author of the *History of the Second World War*, published in 1970:

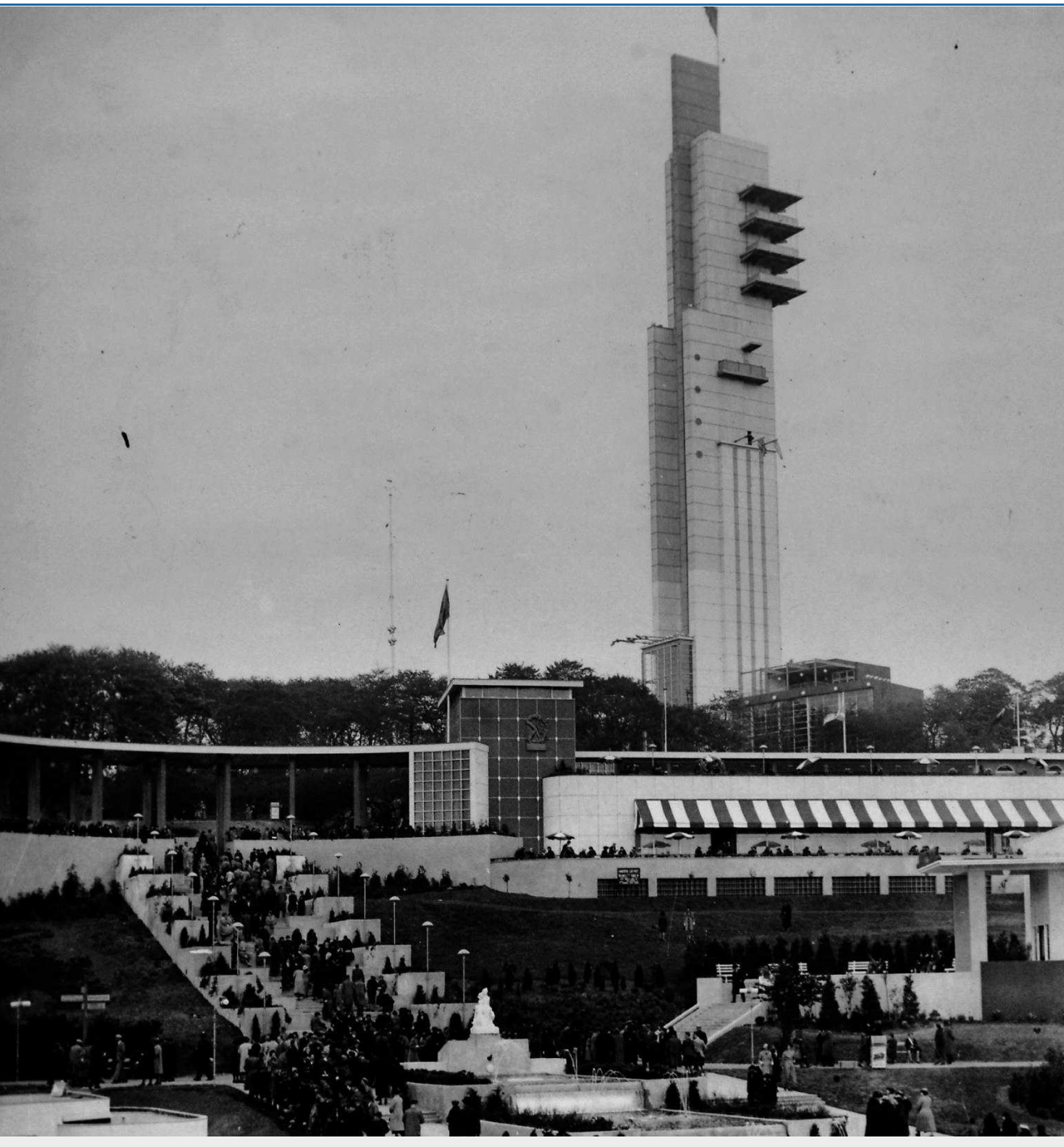
> His description [Hæstrup complained] reminds one of an intellectual analysis of a game of chess, where white beats black because black omits to use his knight at a moment when this would have been possible, while white, however, gets the upper hand through a bishop–castle combination in the final movements . . . There is no room for imponderabilia in this logical analysis.[5]

Hæstrup's immediate complaint – a fair one – was that Liddell Hart's 750 pages almost completely ignored the Resistance. And yet Hæstrup was also criticising a way of looking at the war that was too abstract.

Even so, one valid approach to the history of World War II *is* to see it as something like a game of chess. World War II, however, was played not just by white and black but by a 'rainbow' of participants (to use an American war-planning term of the World War II era). The military and civilian leaders on either side did not know how many pieces the opponent had or where they were. The players of this game did not even know what their own pieces could do, let alone those of the enemy. Rather than beginning the game with the full set of sixteen pieces, they had to think many moves ahead (three or four years in the real world) when new pieces would become available, and they had to balance short-term and long-term advantages.

The mid-twentieth century world crisis was, in the end, a world *war*, and this book is, fundamentally and unapologetically, about military operations. The classification of different levels of warfare is arbitrary, varying from time to time, from country to country, and from one branch of military service to another. A basically three-level concept, now widely used internationally, is followed here. It breaks planning and events into strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The *strategic* level is about overall ('national') military objectives. The *tactical* level is about fighting individual engagements or battles. The *operational* level is about how individual engagements are linked together (in *campaigns*) to achieve strategic goals. (The 'operational' level concept was used by the Germans and the Russians during World War II, but was only formally adopted by many other countries after 1945.) In this book the higher dimension of *grand* strategy is also very important. The historian Sir Michael Howard defined grand strategy as 'the mobilisation of national sources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with those of allied and, where feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime'.[6]

Indeed, the emphasis of the book is on 'grand strategy', and it is about the conduct of affairs by national leaders and generals. The book also takes World War II to have been at this level, for all sides, a rational activity (a 'game of chess'); no government entered the war with the aim of defeat. All the national elites involved had objectives – geopolitical, economic, ideological (including racial) – which they planned to achieve, or they had assets (and sometimes values) which they hoped to defend. Leaders made calculations about means and ends. These calculations were wise or unwise. The means utilised were often terrible and the ends desired sometimes ignoble or even inhuman. The decision-making process was much affected by flaws in national power structures, by misperception, by wildly differing cultural assumptions (of 'self' and 'other'), and by very different ideologies. But there was always a logic which the historian must attempt to recreate and assess.



The 'Tower of Empire' at the 1938 Empire Exhibition, held in the summer of the Munich crisis. The Exhibition was an important symbol of how other countries saw the British Empire, and how Britain saw itself in the late 1930s, before the outbreak of the war with Germany. The event took place in Glasgow, and was a successor to the 1924 Empire Exhibition held at Wembley in London. Although now overshadowed by the Paris International Exposition of 1937 and the New York World's Fair of 1939–40, the 1938 Exhibition was a major event. The British Dominions and colonies scattered across the globe were represented by pavilions; that of Canada was the largest. Other buildings showcased British economic achievements. The next great exhibition, in summer 1951, would be the Festival of Britain. Held on London's South Bank, it marked the end of post-war Austerity. By that time most of the great Empire would be gone, lost to Britain in the conflagration.