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## Introduction

In the last days of November 1941, Nazi Germany's strategic situation was ambiguous: its armies were in possession of most of continental Europe and fighting deep inside the USSR, but the momentum of the Wehrmacht's war machine appeared to be spending itself. At sea, in relation to the numbers of U-boats available, sinkings had been dropping since June; the German surface fleet was unlikely to pick up the slack, since it had just had fuel restrictions imposed on it that all but ruled out a resumption of Atlantic operations. In the air, night-time RAF bombing raids were becoming a feature of everyday life, reaching deeper and deeper into hitherto untouched areas of German geography. On the Russian Front, which consumed most of the assets of the army and air force, operations were still in progress, aimed at rendering untenable the situation of the defenders of Leningrad and Moscow and forcing the surrender of Sevastopol. On the downside, Army Group South had just been forced to abandon its most recent prize – the city of Rostov – to the counter-attacking Red Army, an event that definitely had to be rated as a 'first' in the annals of the Russo–German war. Crucially, the war economy, which needed to deliver maximum output if the armed forces of the Third Reich were to have even a remote chance of meeting the conflicting priorities set by their warlord, had entered a period of crisis. Neither enough labour nor raw materials were available to meet the demands for the coming year, 1942.

This was the backdrop to the conversation that Adolf Hitler had with his armaments minister, Fritz Todt, and the industrialist, Walter Rohland, in the Neue Reichskanzlei on 29 November. Rohland had just returned from an inspection tour of the Eastern Front, where both the quantity and quality of Soviet armour facing Army Group Centre had left him deeply impressed. Todt, as an NSDAP veteran of some standing, was able to talk to the dictator with unprecedented candour, and on this occasion he did. The enemy coalition, he said (including growing Lend-Lease deliveries from the USA in his calculation), was already capable of producing armoured vehicles at such a prodigious rate that the concluding of a negotiated compromise peace was absolutely unavoidable.

Hitler did point out to Todt that the possibilities of such an endeavour were next to non-existent, which was no doubt accurate; merely preparing the ground for

a peace initiative would undoubtedly have required toppling the government of one of the three main belligerent nations at that time – Germany, Great Britain and the USSR. Even so, the fact remains that Todt's warning had been preceded by a virtually identical assessment by *Generaloberst* Friedrich Fromm of the *Allgemeines Heeresamt* a month earlier. Surely, for any statesman caught in such a quandary the logical conclusion had to be that the mere continuation of hostilities would from now on be heavily dependent on avoiding moves that were likely to lead to a further escalation of them.

At the time of Todt's warning, no commitment had yet been made to Tokyo, so reasons of prestige are unlikely to have played a role in deciding the dictator's mind for him, when on 11 December he went on to declare war on the United States. It was without a doubt the one decision which, while being completely avoidable, also irreversibly doomed the Third Reich. Three generations of historians have been thoroughly baffled by it and expressed this sentiment in colourful language. In 1973, Norman Rich termed it 'the greatest single mistake of [Hitler's] career'.<sup>1</sup> Five years later, Sebastian Haffner described it as the most 'incomprehensible' of a series of blunders that turned 'a complete victory into an unavoidable defeat'.<sup>2</sup> To Hitler's future biographer Ian Kershaw, it was nothing so much as 'a futile gesture';<sup>3</sup> a few years later Kershaw added that it was 'more irrational than any decision taken to date'.<sup>4</sup> According to Mark Lowenthal, it was 'one of his most irrational policy decisions'.<sup>5</sup> Williamson Murray and Alan Millett agreed in spirit, terming it 'one of the worst mistakes Hitler made',<sup>6</sup> while to Andrew Roberts it was both an 'unimaginably stupid thing' and a 'suicidally hubristic act'.<sup>7</sup> P. M. H. Bell described it as simply 'freakish and irrational'.<sup>8</sup> Antony Beevor with commendable English understatement refrained from such hyperbole, but still described it as 'rash to say the least'.<sup>9</sup> One of the historians interviewed for

<sup>1</sup> Norman Rich, *Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State and the Course of Expansion* (London: André Deutsch 1973), p 245.

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Haffner, *Anmerkungen zu Hitler* (München: Kindler 1978; Fischer pb 2003), pp 135–41.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 1985; 2015 rp), p 184.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Profiles in Power* (London: Longman 1991), p 159.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Lowenthal, 'Roosevelt and the Coming of War: The Search for United States Policy, 1937–1942'; in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16 (1981), pp 413–40, esp. p 430.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson Murray and Alan Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale UP 2000), pp 135–6.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane 2009), pp 193–6.

<sup>8</sup> P. M. H. Bell, *Twelve Turning Points of the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale UP 2011), pp 77–8.

<sup>9</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 2012), pp 278–9.

Ken Burns' recent documentary on Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt speculated that it must have been made in 'a fit of absent-mindedness and contempt without thinking it through'.<sup>10</sup> Both Klaus Fischer and Rainer Schmidt concluded that it was the equivalent of a historical riddle too far. According to the former, 'the definitive answer will probably never be known, buried forever in irrational motivation',<sup>11</sup> while to the latter it simply defied rational analysis: he described it as the 'the most mysterious decision of the entire war'.<sup>12</sup> So mysterious in fact that quite a few historians have studiously avoided engaging with it in any shape or form, even in the context of publications whose subject would appear to make the inclusion of a sub-chapter or at least a sidebar unavoidable.<sup>13</sup>

Widespread mystification notwithstanding, a couple of schools of thought on the issue have gradually emerged since the 1960s, and it is to these we must now turn. In 1965, German historian Andreas Hillgruber published a massive tome about 'Hitler's strategy, 1940/41'. Although it mostly dealt with the decision-making process that led ultimately to the German dictator unleashing the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, it also briefly touched on his decision to declare war on the USA five and a half months later.<sup>14</sup> To Hillgruber, this event did not lend itself to the kind of analysis one might ordinarily use to make sense of a strategic decision. The only way to explain such a move was by assuming that, as early as mid-November, Hitler had resigned himself to the fact that his way of vanquishing enemies Blitzkrieg-style had come to grief on the resistance of the Red Army. Hence, declaring war on Washington was not a path freely chosen, but 'a gesture meant to cover up the fact that he was no longer in a position to determine the momentum of the war, since the initiative for all subsequent strategic decisions had passed to the enemy coalition'. It came with the added bonus of placing another major obstacle in the path of

<sup>10</sup> 'Ken Burns: The Roosevelts: An Intimate History', 2014 PBS documentary (episode 6).

<sup>11</sup> Klaus P. Fischer, *Nazi Germany: A New History* (London: Constable 1995), p 475.

<sup>12</sup> Rainer F. Schmidt, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Die Zerstörung Europas* (Berlin: be.bra 2008), pp 116–19.

<sup>13</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons 1970); James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (London: Robert Hale 1982); Patrick Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler: America's Entry into World War Two* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois UP 1987); Robert E. Herzstein, *Roosevelt and Hitler: Prelude to War* (New York: Paragon House 1989); Alan F. Wilt, *War from the Top: German and British Military Decision Making during World War II* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co 1990); Williamson Murray and Allan Millett (eds.), *Calculations. Net assessment and the coming of World War II* (New York: The Free Press 1992); Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion and the War against Nazi Germany* (New York: OUP 2001); Norman Stone, *A Short History of World War Two* (London: Penguin 2014 pb); Henrik Eberle, *Hitlers Weltkriege. Wie der Gefreite zum Feldherrn wurde* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie. Politik und Kriegführung 1940–1941* (Frankfurt a.M.: Bernard & Graefe 1965), pp 540–54.

'oppositional forces in the military leadership seeking to find a way out of the hopeless conflict that was now developing'.<sup>15</sup>

Hillgruber effectively divested of any rationality what could be seen as one of the most momentous strategic decisions of the twentieth century. This was especially so in later publications where Hillgruber even dropped the idea that Hitler's aim, at least in part, was to force his military elite to discard thoughts of a separate peace.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Hillgruber reduced any thought process that may have taken place to the kind of reaction more commonly associated with sulking teenagers. Such an interpretation had the welcome side effect of further reducing the standing of an already thoroughly loathsome personality, which may go a long way towards explaining its remarkable longevity. For the next half century, many authors of general histories of World War II and biographies of Adolf Hitler adopted this line or slight variations thereof;<sup>17</sup> a few even spelled out what Hillgruber had only implied, namely that by giving up on the idea of seeking an orthodox military victory in the midst of an ongoing total war, the dictator had chosen a path that could lead only to self-immolation. The obvious conclusion to draw from this was that such an option would be acceptable to him only if by taking it he would be guaranteed the extinction of his domestic enemies. Hence, out of sheer spite, he now began implementing a policy of genocide aimed at his main domestic enemy (the Jews).<sup>18</sup> Rather remarkably, Hillgruber's influence can even be traced in his phraseology, which some historians adopted wholly or in part. This author knows of only one instance where the plausibility of this interpretation of events was openly called into question.<sup>19</sup>

The early 1980s saw the emergence of two novel interpretations, which in contrast to Hillgruber's both attempted to look for a genuine strategic rationale. In a 1980 article, Gerhard Weinberg made the case that German decision-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp 553–4.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, *Deutsche Großmacht- und Weltpolitik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Düsseldorf: Droste 1978), pp 197–222.

<sup>17</sup> Joachim Fest, *Hitler. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt: Propyläen 1973), p 892; Haffner, *Anmerkungen*, pp 135–41; Jürgen Förster, 'Das Unternehmen Barbarossa – eine historische Ortsbestimmung'; in: Horst Boog et al, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: DVA 1983) [= *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Bd. 4], pp 1086–8; Harald Steffahn, 'Hitler als Soldat und militärischer Führer'; in: Christian Zentner and Friedemann Bedürftig (eds.), *Das große Lexikon des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (München: Südwest Verlag 1993), pp 254–7; Joachim Fest, *Speer. Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Alexander Fest Verlag 1999), p 178; Rafael Seligmann, *Hitler. Die Deutschen und ihr Führer* (München: Ullstein 2004), pp 258–66; Klaus P. Fischer, *Hitler and America* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP 2011), pp 152–67.

<sup>18</sup> Haffner, *Anmerkungen*, pp 162–7; Gregor Schölgens, *Jenseits von Hitler. Die Deutschen in der Weltpolitik von Bismarck bis heute* (Berlin: Propyläen 2005), pp 196–8; Fischer, *Hitler and America*, pp 152–67.

<sup>19</sup> Guntram Schulze-Wegner, *Die deutsche Kriegsmarine-Rüstung 1942–1945* (Hamburg: E.S. Mittler 1997), p 225.

making in November and December 1941 was determined by both a chronic underestimation of American military potential and the wish to seize a rare opportunity to finally get Japan to initiate hostilities against the British Empire.<sup>20</sup> An agenda by Berlin to actively seek war with the USA was assumed as a given. In addition, a state of war would allow the Kriegsmarine's submarine arm to reap a rich harvest in the waters off the Americas – as indeed turned out to be the case from January to June 1942. Weinberg also addressed the question of Berlin neglecting to demand a quid pro quo from Tokyo, like a declaration of war on the USSR. In his view, Hitler refrained from such a move because of a concern about Japanese strategic overreach that might result from this and because he was reluctant to raise questions that might give the pro-peace faction in Tokyo one last chance to challenge the consensus for going to war.<sup>21</sup>

In 1981, Eberhard Jäckel offered a different explanation: without criticising Hillgruber by name, he questioned the plausibility of a 'suicidal impulse' as the main driver for a major strategic decision. Instead, he developed an idea first put forward by Klaus Reinhardt in 1972, who had made a case for Hitler being resigned in November 1941 to the Americans joining the British in the very near future.<sup>22</sup> Only through a Japanese declaration of war would it be possible to force the Americans to split their armed forces between two oceanic theatres. Hence the need to bring Japan into the war at any diplomatic price.<sup>23</sup> While both Weinberg and Jäckel did a more creditable job than Hillgruber, insofar as they managed to move the debate away from musings about self-immolation and back into the realm of strategy, their essays raised as many questions as they answered. They did not explain which US move was probably key in making Hitler accept the inevitability of war with the USA or what estimate made him conclude that Washington would deploy a large part of its assets to the Far East, rather than prioritising Europe straightaway. Nor did they address a number of areas (especially the air

<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Weinberg, 'Germany's Declaration of War on the United States: A New Look'; in: Hans L. Trefousse (ed.), *Germany and America: Essays on Problems of International Relations and Immigration* (New York: Columbia UP 1980) [= Brooklyn College Studies on society in change, Vol. 21], pp 54–70.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p 67.

<sup>22</sup> Klaus Reinhardt, *Die Wende vor Moskau. Das Scheitern der Strategie Hitlers im Winter 1941/42* (Stuttgart: DVA 1972), pp 181–4. At the same time, Reinhardt failed to completely divest himself from Hillgruber's idea that Hitler was resigned to losing the war as early as mid-November.

<sup>23</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, 'Die deutsche Kriegserklärung an die Vereinigten Staaten von 1941'; in: Friedrich J. Kroneck and Thomas Oppermann (eds.), *Im Dienste Deutschlands und des Rechts. Festschrift für Wilhelm G. Grewe zum 70 Geburtstag am 16. Oktober 1981* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft 1981), pp 117–37. An English translation – albeit missing a third of the source notes of the original – can be found in Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler in History* (London: UP of New England 1984), pp 66–87.

war, the critical situation in Russia and the production crisis of the German war economy), which appeared to make a compelling case for strategic retrenchment. Crucially, they failed to explain why the Japanese announcement of impending hostilities in the Pacific and the news of the Pearl Harbor attack were not simply met with a vague promise of indirect support and in due course possibly an opportunistic expansion of submarine activity in the Atlantic. Contrary to what some authors allege to this day,<sup>24</sup> the Tripartite Pact was defensive in nature and the strategic distraction desired by the German government had just been delivered free of charge. Even so, the Jäckel theory in particular went on to achieve considerable currency in academic circles.<sup>25</sup> It was adopted by the official German history,<sup>26</sup> and in 1987 it received the ultimate accolade when Hillgruber himself championed it in one of the last articles he ever wrote.<sup>27</sup> Two years later, Enrico Syring built on it to present a variant, which pointed to the need to include the military situation in Russia in any detailed analysis of the events of those days – a point so far omitted by all historians.<sup>28</sup> Due to its brevity, the Syring article inevitably shared many of the limitations of the essays by Weinberg and Jäckel, but it still constitutes the best attempt to analyse Hitler's decision in the context of contemporary events.

Over the following years, most historians touching on this subject tended to restrict discussion of it to a paragraph or two at the most; there was usually a clear dividing line between those favouring either Hillgruber or Jäckel, but even that could get blurred at times.<sup>29</sup> Only one historian attempted to

<sup>24</sup> John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York: Alfred Knopf 1997), pp 153–9.

<sup>25</sup> Marlis Steinert, *Hitler* (München: C. H. Beck 1994), p 521; Herbert Sirois, *Zwischen Illusion und Krieg. Deutschland und die USA 1933–1941* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh 2000), pp 255–61; Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (London: Allen Lane 2008), pp 243–4; Roberts, *Storm of War*, p 194; Lars Lüdike, *Griff nach der Weltherrschaft. Die Aussenpolitik des Dritten Reiches 1933–1945* (Berlin: be.bra 2009), pp 149–50; Peter Longerich, *Hitler. Biographie* (München: Siedler 2015), p 827; Stephen G. Fritz, *The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader* (New Haven: Yale UP 2018), pp 218–19; Ralf-Georg Reuth, *Kurze Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Berlin: Rowohlt 2018), pp 187–8.

<sup>26</sup> Bernd Wegner, 'Hitlers Strategie zwischen Pearl Harbor und Stalingrad'; in: DRZW 6, pp 97–127, esp. pp 99–100.

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, 'Hitler und die USA 1933–1945'; in: Otmar Franz (ed.), *Europas Mitte* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt 1987), pp 125–44.

<sup>28</sup> Enrico Syring, 'Hitlers Kriegserklärung an Amerika vom 11. Dezember 1941'; in: Wolfgang Michalka (ed.), *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analyse. Grundzüge. Forschungsbilanz* (München: Piper 1989), pp 683–96.

<sup>29</sup> Udo Schmidt, *Hitlers Englandbild und seine strategischen Entscheidungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (München: GRIN Verlag 1998), pp 107–20; Ralf-Georg Reuth, *Hitler. Eine politische Biographie* (München: Piper 2003), pp 546–51; Schölgen, *Jenseits von Hitler*, p 198; Lars Lüdike, *Hitlers Weltanschauung. Von 'Mein Kampf' bis zum 'Nero-Befehl'* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2016), pp 169–71.



combine key elements of the theories of Hillgruber, Jäckel and Weinberg.<sup>30</sup> In 1995, Gerhard Weinberg attempted an original approach that involved reprising many of the points he had made in 1980, especially the existence of a long-term agenda on the German side, stretching back as far as June 1939, to initiate hostilities against the USA. At the same time, he took a closer look at the hardware of war that was on display in both sides' arsenals in 1941. He reached the conclusion that for the German dictator the main Japanese contribution to the Tripartite Pact lay in its surface fleet – at the time the third largest in the world.<sup>31</sup> In early 1939, the Kriegsmarine had had plans to give Germany a sizeable blue-water navy, but the start of the war later that year, along with the United Kingdom's continuing the fight after Dunkirk, had forced these to be put on hold. Since German capital ships had thus far taken at least four years to build, a German high seas presence that might do more than occasionally inconvenience the Anglo-Americans appeared an increasingly remote prospect. Tokyo joining the European Axis would go a long way towards filling this gap. This explanation was not only plausible but also supported by the Führer's idiosyncratic fondness for the Japanese Navy, which is borne out by existing sources.<sup>32</sup>

Ian Kershaw in 2007 likewise saw a particular theatre of war as the key to understanding the decision to declare war on the USA. In the longest piece yet written on the topic, he rejected the notion that the dictator had simply acted out a 'grandiose moment of megalomaniac madness'.<sup>33</sup> Instead, he pointed to the problems that had arisen out of the US Navy's increasingly assertive presence in the eastern half of the North Atlantic and the growing likelihood of war arising therefrom. Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, was the first to raise this issue in the dock at Nürnberg. He claimed that in private conversation Hitler had justified declaring war on the USA by pointing to the momentum towards conflict created by the shooting war between the Kriegsmarine and the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet.<sup>34</sup> Other historians before Kershaw had touched on this, but none had attempted to analyse it in such detail. American interference in the naval sphere had taken different forms.

<sup>30</sup> Volker Ullrich, *Adolf Hitler. Die Jahre des Untergangs* (Berlin: Fischer 2018), pp 254–5.

<sup>31</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: CUP 1995), pp 249–52, 262–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* This particular aspect of Weinberg's explanation is certainly far more believable than any variant of the Hillgruber theory and deserved to receive a greater echo than it did. At the time of writing only Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War, 1939–1945* (London: Harper Press 2011), p 197, has taken his cue from it.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World 1940–1941* (London: Allen Lane 2007), pp 382–430.

<sup>34</sup> *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the Military Court in Nuremberg (TMWC)*, Vol. X, (Nürnberg 1947), pp 297–8. Also: 'Document 8. Ribbentrop, Hitler and War. Memorandum for Justice Jackson (June 1945)'; in: Richard Overy (ed.), *Interrogations: The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands* (London: Allen Lane 2001), pp 318–22.

A Neutrality Patrol that had acted in a thoroughly unneutral fashion since September 1939 was followed by the granting of repair facilities for Royal Navy vessels in US ports, the basing of troops and ships in Iceland in July 1941 and the start of convoying from mid-September 1941. In the grand scheme of things, Kershaw was inclined to follow Jäckel. Standing back and allowing the Americans to concentrate on Japan was not really an option for Berlin, since this might mean the obliteration of the Far Eastern partner. US resources had to be split while American rearmament was still in a preliminary stage. Hence, a mere escalation of the undeclared war between the US Navy and the Kriegsmarine could not suffice.

It is my contention that none of the explanations put forward can explain the decision by the German leadership to push the USA into hostilities. The Hillgruber theory borders on the ahistorical, since it clearly views the decision through the lens of the events of 1945, when attempts by Hitler to render Germany's defeat as comprehensive and destructive as possible are undeniable. Identifying a similar pattern of behaviour in late November and early December of 1941, when Germany occupied most of the European continent and had an army group bearing down on Moscow, requires a truly major leap of faith.

The Jäckel theory and its offshoots, while clearly superior, come with their own set of limitations. For one thing, some of those proposing it give us a Hitler a little too anxious about doing the right thing by his Japanese allies, whether out of a sense of moral commitment,<sup>35</sup> or because he feared they might be obliterated by the USA unless he were to force Washington to direct part of its forces against Germany first.<sup>36</sup> Such selflessness definitely clashes with his known track record in treating any of his other allies or satellites. Furthermore, none of its proponents has integrated into their analysis an examination of the German military situation in Russia, in the air and on the factory floor. Nor can they explain the curious haste shown by Hitler and his diplomats during the last days of peace with the USA. The Japanese had not made their entry into the war conditional upon a German declaration of war on the USA; the Germans in turn did not even attempt to get something tangible in return, a blockade of Vladivostok being the most obvious thing they could have been expected to insist upon. Instead, a suggestion along these lines by the German ambassador in Tokyo was curtly dismissed. It is thus obvious that a major reassessment of these events is long overdue, especially in a day and age where even such aspects of Hitler's life as his interest in art,<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> For examples, see Peter Brett, *The USA and the World, 1917–1945* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1997), p 122, Lukacs, *Hitler of History*, pp 153–9, as well as Warren F. Kimball, *Forged in War: Roosevelt, Churchill and the Second World War* (New York: William Morrow 1997), pp 123–4.

<sup>36</sup> Schölgen, *Jenseits von Hitler*, pp 197–8.

<sup>37</sup> Birgit Schwarz, *Geniewahn: Hitler und die Kunst* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2009).



architecture<sup>38</sup> and Wagnerian opera,<sup>39</sup> as well as his strengths and limitations as a wordsmith of the German language,<sup>40</sup> are coming in for serious revisionist treatment.

It is only fair to stress that the author was encouraged in his task by the work of two colleagues who have re-examined areas that have a direct bearing on this issue: ideally, these two titles should be read together with this work. Evan Mawdsley has produced what is in effect a new global history of the events during the fortnight that saw the final moves in the escalation to global conflict.<sup>41</sup> Brendan Simms has made a compelling argument that Hitler's ideology incorporated a major anti-American slant from its earliest days, thus considerably easing any decision-making process leading to a declaration of war.<sup>42</sup> This work, by contrast, will endeavour to answer the question of whether it could also have been driven by a rational weighing of pros and cons not subject to ideology. This book will examine the information that reached the dictator over the course of 1941 in all fields of military strategy as well as foreign and economic policy with a direct or indirect bearing on relations with Japan and the USA. It will endeavour to establish what kind of 'frame of reference' Hitler would have been working from in the months before 11 December 1941.<sup>43</sup> No assumptions will be made about news of a particular event – no matter how well publicised – actually reaching the dictator or one of his closest collaborators unless the means by which it was conveyed to them survives. Hence, a Tokyo power struggle, a speech by the British prime minister or a vote in the US Senate will only enter the narrative of this book if an intelligence agency, senior military command or foreign ministry department of the Third Reich kept a contemporary record of it in the form of a memo, diary entry or set of briefing minutes. Instances where the older scholarship made mistaken assumptions about the information available to the Führer prior to 11 December will be highlighted. Speculation about the extent to which the dictator's temperament or mood swings could have affected

<sup>38</sup> Wolfram Pyta, *Hitler. Der Künstler als Politiker und Feldherr* (München: Siedler 2015), pp 47–177.

<sup>39</sup> Sebastian Werr, *Heroische Weltst. Hitler und die Musik* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag 2014); Hermann Grampp, 'Großonkel Leitwolf'; in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (25.7.2018) – 'Geisteswissenschaften' supplement.

<sup>40</sup> Helmuth Kiesel, 'War Adolf Hitler ein guter Schriftsteller?'; in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (4.8.2014) – 'Feuilleton' supplement.

<sup>41</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *December 1941: Twelve Days that Began a World War* (New Haven: Yale UP 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Brendan Simms, *Hitler: Only the World Was Enough* (London: Allen Lane 2019).

<sup>43</sup> The recent work by Neitzel and Welzer constitutes a powerful reminder that the decisions of past generations can only be fully understood if any kind of information that reached them after the fact is deliberately ignored. See Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer 2011), esp. pp 16–82.

a particular decision will be avoided; instead, an attempt will be made to square what is still widely regarded as a 'freakish and irrational decision' with a recent characterisation of the dictator by an eminent scholar, who concedes that 'Hitler, irrespective of his politically fixated aims, was a man possessed of a remarkable strategic instinct'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Bernd Wegner, *Von Stalingrad nach Kursk*; in: DRZW Bd. 8, p 37 (fn 156).