

THUS BEGAN THE WORLD WAR II

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***Abstract:** World War II is now at three generations away, and this year, on September 1, it was 83 years since it broke out. The war cast a long and very dark shadow over the second half of the 20th century.*

The commemoration of his victims continues and the popular fascination with his history is still alive. Unlike the Great War of 1914–1918, the second conflict affected literally the entire world, resulted in around five times as many deaths, and was punctuated by remarkable moments of drama and sacrifice, all of which explain that lingering interest.

The chronological distance from this war has, however, allowed historians to think differently about how to describe and define it, how to explain its course, and above all, what topics should now concern us when we think to the experience and consequences of this war.

***Keywords:** Total War; battle; Danzig; holocaust; Polish forces; English diplomacy.*

1. Introduction

Hitler's invasion of Poland was the event that triggered World War II. Britain and France offered to support Polish independence and pledged to come to its aid in the event of a German attack. The British and French governments issued an ultimatum to Germany, demanding its withdrawal. Hitler dismissed this threat, believing that the French and British were unlikely to do anything to stop the German invasion. When Germany failed to respond to the ultimatum, Britain and France were drawn into another war, and so World War II was born.

Apart from the main causes, which generally led to the outbreak of wars, economic, diplomatic, military, historical, religious, the Second World War also had causes related to the political-military personalities of the most powerful states of the time and their vanity.

World War II deserves its reputation as the most horrific event in modern history for the way in which the processes of dehumanization and killing were based on so-called rational calculation.

„Science and technology were applied to the most murderous ends known to humankind. The range of uses was astounding, involving impersonal aerial bombardment, depersonalized murder in gas chambers, and face-to-face executions of entire communities. It is no wonder that, for

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the 85 million men and women who served (and survived) in one of the armed forces during the war and for the vast population of people caught up in the slaughter (and surviving), the war was the most unforgettable moment in their lives”¹.

2. A brief comparative analysis of the main features of the two world wars from the point of view of military science

World War II (1939-1945) was the greatest cataclysm in modern history. This was truly a "world war".

If we compare this conflict with its major predecessor the First World War (1914-1918), also known as the "*Great War*", the "*European War*" and the "*War of the Nations*", we notice some big differences that allow us to say that the Second World War (1939-1945) was indeed **total war**.

The war's scale and exceptional destructiveness dwarfed even the sacrifices and losses of the Great War that preceded it.

Making a comparative analysis of the two world conflagrations, we can highlight, from the point of view of some essential characteristics for a military analysis, many elements that differentiate them and that amplify the total war character of the second one, as follows:

- causes: The First World War was triggered by the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary ("*The Sarajevo attempt*"), while the Second World War was triggered by the grievances resulting from the First World War, through the Treaty of Versailles which established payments for damages and crimes produced especially by Germany, which was used by Adolf Hitler to push Germany into a new war;

- the number of participating states - twenty-eight in the First World War and sixty-one states in the Second World War;

-groupings of forces: in the first war: the two groupings of forces of the First World War were the Allied Powers and the Central Powers, while the groupings of the Second World War were the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers. The Axis Powers (or Central Powers) were made up of the three main powers Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and imperialist Japan, which were called the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis. The Allied Powers (Central

¹ Joanna Bourke, *The Second World War: A Peoples History*, Publisher: Oxford University Press, USA, Year: 2003, p.14.

Powers) was formed alongside "*the big four*", the United Kingdom, the USA, China and the USSR;

- the geographical area, which was covered by the theaters of operations, was incomparably larger. "*The Great War*" mainly engaged the European space and the second world confrontation encompassed all continents;

- duration: the first world conflagration lasted four years (1914-1918) and the second lasted six years (1939-1945);

- the forms, methods, weapons and tactics used were totally different. While in the First World War the fighting were in the trenches with rifles, machine guns and poison gas was predominant, in the Second World War modern artillery, tanks, planes and battleships as well as submarines were used. Special operations, secret communications, land and anti-aircraft artillery and missiles, radar, and fighter and/or bomber aviation were also developed during this war. The evolution of armaments led to the development of the atomic bomb which was the catalyst in ending the war;

- the amplitude of the battles was almost limitless;

- the dedication of the entire globe to the conduct of war and the destruction of distinctions between the battlefield and the home front were the main features of this conflict.

- propaganda became a mandatory component of total war, necessary to increase production and maintain morale;

- rationalization became one of the main methods for securing the necessary materials for waging war;

- the moral principles and laws of war were no longer respected. Total war is waged with disregard for morality, customs or international laws, because the warring parties are inspired by enmities born of modern ideologies;

- the principles of mobilization are changed. Total war involves the mobilization not only of the armed forces, but also of the entire population. The most important determinant of total war was the widespread, indiscriminate and deliberate inclusion of civilians on the list of legitimate military targets;

- the structure and percentage of losses are different. While only 5% of the deaths in the First War (1914-1918) were civilians, in the Second War (1939-1945) civilian deaths reached 66%. Far more civilians than soldiers were killed in Belgium, China, France, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Furthermore, regardless

of the categories we use, large proportions of these victims were undeniably innocent;

- the holocaust character of some military actions that were carried out knowingly and not as "errors of war". In the specialized literature I have come across many examples of this frightening fact. The Holocaust is the prominent example of the slaughter of non-combatants. Unfortunately, this was also the case in many other campaigns of the war. For example, of the six million Poles (Jews and non-Jews) who were killed by the Germans, one third were children;

- World War I ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, in which Germany assumed responsibility for the war. This led to the separation of Austria-Hungary from several states and the independence of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Poland from Russia. It also led to the formation of the League of Nations;

- the Second World War ended with the defeat of Germany and Japan. This led to the emergence of two new world superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union;

- The United Nations was established after the war to promote cooperation between nations and prevent another war.

Characterization and description of the war differs from author to author, in fact, from nation to nation. Each participating nation tells its own story of the "war" and points of agreement are hard to find.

Even the answers to basic questions like "*what happened*", "*how it happened*", "*why it happened*", "*when it happened*", "*how it was done*", are different.

Even such basic questions as "*what*," "*when*," and "*who*" are contested.

What is *this military conflict called*? For the British it is the *Second World War*, while the Americans call it *World War Two*; (*World War Two*), for the Russians it is the *Great Patriotic War* (*Великая Отечественная Война*), while the Japanese designate it as the *Greater East Asia War* (*the Greater East Asia War*).

There is great disagreement over the name of the most atrocious event of the war that saw the massacre of 6 million Jews. Should it be called "*Holocaust*", "*Shoah*", "*Event*", a genocide, an extermination, a mass murder, "*l'univers concentrationnaire*" (*concentration camp universe*) or even the Nazi phrase "*Final Solution*"?

For these reasons, every history of World War II is necessarily fractured and incomplete.

3. Poland, Germany and the West

In 1933, the English novelist H.G. Wells published *"The Shape of Things to Come"*², a fictional account of the next fifty years of world affairs. His central prediction was the coming of a *"Last War"* in Europe in the near future.

The date he chose was January 1940, and the cause of the new war a minor incident in Danzig, in which a Polish-Jewish traveling agent is shot dead in the main station by a young National Socialist (Nazi) who interpreted the grotesque efforts of the Polish to adjust a broken dental plaque as an act of mockery towards a representative of the Third Reich.

In Wells's story, the incident is just the spark needed to ignite the powder keg of European rivalries and mistrust. In two days, the war covers all of Europe.

"The tension," suggested Wells, *"had risen to such a point that disaster seemed a relief, and Europe was free to break to pieces"*³.

This novelist was a visionary or had a premonition because something similar happened in the fall of 1939, about four months earlier than Wells had predicted.

The European war broke out within three days of the German capture of Danzig. Demands for the former German city's return sparked a conflict that began with a German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 and became a world war when, two days later, the British and French empires declared war on Germany.

The formal cause of the conflict masked the reality that in fact the European order was in a state of extraordinary tension until 1939, caused by the collapse of the international system established at the end of the Great War.

The September 1939 conflict that launched World War II was the result of larger causes than the Danzig statute.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told the House of Commons on 24 August that the war, if it came, would not be *"for the*

² H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (London, 1933).

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 156-157.

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*political future of a remote town in a foreign country, but would be fought to preserve the fundamental principles of the legislation of international law"*⁴.

Adolf Hitler told his military commanders during a conference held on May 23 1939 to prepare for war against Poland that Danzig was not at stake: "*For us it is a matter of expanding our living space [Lebensraum] in the East and to make the food supply more secure*"⁵, and the solution is the coming of a '*Last War*' in Europe in the near future.

The war that broke out in September 1939 can only be properly explained in the context of the deterioration of the European order in the 1930s, when economic crisis, the rise of authoritarian dictatorships, deep ideological divisions, nationalist rivalries and the collapse of the League of Nations' efforts to preserve peace all combined to make it likely a major conflict.

However, it was a war ostensibly worn for Polish independence and a showdown for Poland's future.

Above all, it was Poland's uncompromising refusal to make any concessions to its powerful German neighbour that made war almost certain.

Poland was, wrote a British Foreign Office official in May 1939, "*the only state in Europe able and willing to put up a serious and aggressive resistance to Germany*"⁶.

The Polish problem returned in the immediate aftermath of World War I when the victorious Allied Powers decided to create an independent Polish state and grant it a land corridor to the sea through former German territory, with the prospect of using the German city of Danzig as a major port for the trade of Polish import/e port. "*The port was granted free city status under a League of Nations committee which was to appoint a League commissioner to oversee the arrangements made to protect Polish trade and preserve the principle of self-government for a largely German population*"⁷.

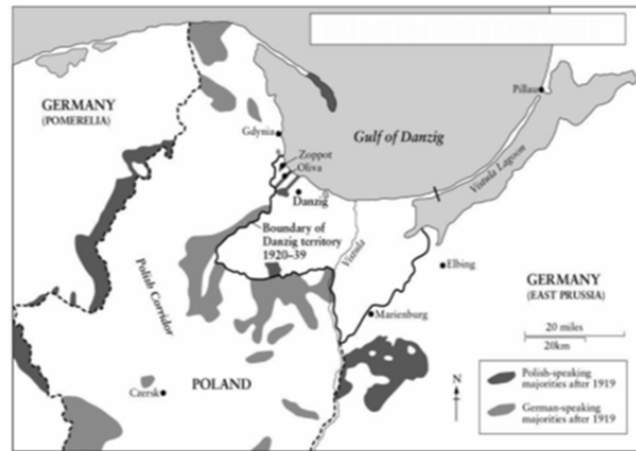
⁴ *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Vol. 351, col. 10, 24 August 1939, apud Richard Overy, *1939: Countdown to War*, Publisher: Viking, Year: 2010.

⁵ *Akten zur Deutschen auswärtigen Politik (ADAP)*, Serie D, Band VI (Baden-Baden, 1956), p. 479, Bericht über eine Besprechung am 23 Mai 1939, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

⁶ The National Archives, Kew, London (NA), PREM 1/357, FO memorandum, 'The Polish request for Financial Assistance for military purposes', 9 May 1939, p. 2, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

⁷ C. Kimmich, *The Free City: Danzig and German Foreign Policy, 1919-1934* (New Haven, 1968), pp. 3-9.

The solution was never accepted by the German side, while Polish leaders recognized that the outcome was bound to cause a future crisis of some kind.



*The Free City of Danzig and its Neighbours*⁸

The status of the Free City, noted Marshal Józef Piłsudski, ruler of Poland from 1926 until his death in 1935, will always be *"the barometer of Polish-German relations"*⁹.

Analyzing the history of the Nazi Party in the Danzig area, in the period before the outbreak of the conflict, we find that German policies were directed towards capturing this port city, thus: *"Shortly after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, in May 1933, the National Party Danzig Socialist won 38 of the 72 seats in the city assembly and formed the city government. From then until the outbreak of war in September 1939, Danzig was effectively an outpost of the Third Reich. Until 1936 there was a virtual one-party political system, and in November 1938 the city assembly, in defiance of the League Commissioner, introduced the famous German*

⁸ Richard Overy, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

⁹ J. Beck, *Dernier rapport: politique polonaise 1926-1939* (Paris, 1955), p. 187, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

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Nuremberg Laws of 1935 to deny full citizenship to the Jewish population of Danzig ¹⁰.

The strongly nationalistic German population agitated in 1939 to return home to Germany.

The Polish problem was more than Danzig. Following the Treaty of Versailles, signed in June 1919, Poland received not only the Corridor through the territory of West Prussia, but also important parts of the industrial region of Silesia. German volunteer forces, recruited from soldiers who had returned from the front in 1919, fought against Polish claims along the eastern border until the volunteer corps was finally disbanded in 1922.

The new Polish state also included a large area of territory that had belonged to the former Russian Empire. In 1920, the revolutionary Red Army, fresh from victories in the Russian Civil War, invaded Poland in an attempt to destroy the young Polish state and spread the proletarian revolution further into Europe. The Red Cavalry came almost to the German border, while Mikhail Tukhachevsky's poorly armed troops threatened to encircle Warsaw, the former capital of Russian Poland.

"In the absence of any effort by Britain and France to protect the state they had recently established, the Poles achieved a remarkable victory under Józef Piłsudski, who in 1914 raised a Polish legion to fight alongside Austria-Hungary against Tsarist Russia. The Battle of Warsaw has rarely received the weight it deserves in the historical narratives of the 1920s, but it saved Eastern Europe from a communist crusade and preserved Poland's independence against its two dangerous neighbors, Germany and the Soviet Union. The 1920 victory also became the founding myth of the new Polish state and played a role in its subsequent determination not to submit to any of its powerful neighbours in 1939" ¹¹.

In the interwar years, Poland maintained its fragile independence and became a significant regional power in Eastern Europe; some Polish leaders looked forward to an extension of Polish influence to the Black Sea or Soviet Ukraine. In 1932, Poland signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, and in 1934 it signed a similar agreement with Hitler's Germany.

¹⁰ H. S. Levine, *Hitler's Free City: A History of the Nazi Party in Danzig 1925-1939* (Chicago, 1973), pp. 121-125, 127-138.

¹¹ A. Zamoyski, *Warsaw 1920: Lenin's Failed Conquest of Europe* (London, 2008), apud Richard Overly, *op.cit.*

*"Poland was heavily armed by the standards of Europe's lesser powers, devoting about half of government spending to the military by the mid-1930s. At the same time, Poland was not viewed by the major Western powers as a potential ally. Polish anti-Semitism and the authoritarian nature of the regime did not help build bridges to the West. In the summer of 1938, Polish leaders favored the breakup of the Czech state in the hope that Poland would be able to dominate an independent Slovakia and become a major influence in the space from the Baltic states to the borders of Romania. The Polish government shared the spoils of the dismembered Czechoslovakian state by issuing a successful ultimatum to the Czechs to cede the Teschen territory to Poland. It did not seem impossible to the West that the Poles would join the German camp"*¹².

The sudden deterioration of German-Polish relations to the point where Germany started the war in September 1939 resulted from the fact that Polish leaders did not consider Poland as part of the German camp. There was little apparent tension between Poland and Germany before Munich, although the status of Danzig and the future of the Polish Corridor were elements of the postwar situation that German leaders would have liked to resolve.

The resurgence of German power under Hitler posed a profound threat, but Poland's leaders were determined that in their case the integrity of the Treaty of Versailles would be defended at all costs. Although eager to profit from the collapse of Czech resistance in 1938, Poland did not want the Munich solution to be applied to German minorities living on Polish territory or in the Free City. On the German side, the breakup of Czechoslovakia paved the way for a further revision of the status quo in Eastern Europe.

*"On October 1, 1938, when German troops entered the German Sudetenland areas ceded to them by the Munich Agreement, Hitler told his aide that the Polish problems had not been forgotten: "At the right time, when the Poles have been ceded, he will shoot the Pole"*¹³.

It is unlikely that at this stage Hitler was thinking of war with Poland. The preferred solution was Warsaw's agreement to revise the

¹² A. Prazmowska, *Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Second World War* (London, 2000), pp. 137, 144-145.

¹³ G. Engel, *Heeresadjutant bei Hitler, 1938-1943: Aufzeichnungen des Majors Engel* (Stuttgart, 1974), p. 40, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

borders, accept the cession of Danzig to Germany, and become part of a pro-German bloc in Eastern Europe.

*"On October 24, 1938, the German foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, invited the Polish ambassador, Józef Lipski, to a luncheon in the Grand Hotel in Berchtesgaden, close to Hitler's retreat on the Obersalzberg. Here he first suggested that Danzig be returned to Germany and that a road-rail link be established across the Corridor, with extraterritorial rights for Germany over the route. Poland, Ribbentrop suggested, could also ally with Germany, Italy and Japan in the Anti-Comintern pact against the Soviet Union"*¹⁴.

Lipski returned to Warsaw and communicated the German suggestions to the foreign minister, Józef Beck. He was the dominant figure in the Polish government and had been in the Polish Foreign Office since 1932. Beck sensed that the German leadership was about to engage in a "war of nerves" over Danzig.

"At the end of November, Beck made it clear to Ribbentrop that there was no doubt that Danzig could not be reincorporated into Germany; instead, he proposed the dissolution of the League Committee and a joint Polish-German agreement, respecting the interests of the two peoples of Danzig but retaining their independent status.

On November 24, Hitler instructed the German armed forces to prepare a plan to capture Danzig by force.

*On January 5, 1939, Beck was invited to Berlin, where Hitler reiterated the view that Danzig must become German again. In the spring, the German tone became more emphatic. On March 20, Ribbentrop told Lipski that Danzig must be returned to Germany and that extraterritorial communications must be established. He insisted that Beck come to Berlin to negotiate"*¹⁵.

The timing of the request was rather inopportune given that it came in a turbulent week, only six days after the Czech president was forced to travel to Berlin to ask for "protection" (followed by the German occupation

¹⁴ W. Jedrzejewicz (ed.), *Diplomat in Berlin 1933-1939: Papers and Memoirs of Józef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland* (New York, 1968), pp. 453-458, Doc. 124, Notes concerning ambassador Lipski's conversation with Reich Minister of Foreign Affairs Ribbentrop, 24 October 1938, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

¹⁵ Jedrzejewicz (ed.), *Diplomat in Berlin*, pp. 482, 582. Vezi și D. Schenk, *Hitlers Mann in Danzig: Albert Forster und die NS-Verbrechen in Danzig-Westpreussen* (Bonn, 2000), pp. 103-104, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

of the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia) and two days before Lithuania was forced to cede back another German territory, Memel.

Polish Foreign Minister Beck drew the obvious conclusion and refused to come. That was the end of friendly negotiations. Ambassador Lipski did not meet either Hitler or Ribbentrop again until August 31, the day before the German invasion of his country.

For Polish foreign policy officials, things were quite clear in the sense that there was not much left to negotiate with the Germans.

At a meeting at the Polish Foreign Ministry on March 24, Beck outlined Polish options. *Germany, he argued, "has lost its predictability". Hitler had to face the kind of determination he had not yet encountered anywhere in Europe. Poland, Beck continued, had a reference line in the negotiations below which it could not go. "It's clear," he continued, "We will fight"*¹⁶.

The front lines were established in the last week of March 1939. The day after the Beck meeting, Hitler ordered the German armed forces to prepare an operational plan for the invasion of Poland that included the possibility of the Poles being isolated internationally if they refused to accept German demands.

Polish forces on the western border were placed on alert the same week. In Britain, where the German occupation and break-up of Czechoslovakia ended any illusions that Hitler could be contained within a framework acceptable to British and French interests, the German annexation of the Memel territory caused growing fears that a sudden military strike would add Danzig to the German captures.

It seems that things were moving in a direction of no return, the path of war: *"Information sent to London from Poland indicated a strengthening of Polish attitudes. On March 27, the Polish Chief of Staff indicated that Poland would fight for Danzig. Polish opinion was, he believed, 'unprepared' even for reasonable discussion"; the army was "just as tough". Secret sources indicated to the British that Germany was about to occupy Danzig in a surprise military strike. Chamberlain was informed: "Action imminent"*¹⁷.

¹⁶ Lipski papers, pp. 503-4, Doc. 138, memorandum on the conference of senior officials with the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ NA, PREM 1/331a, note for Horace Wilson from Col. Hastings Ismay, 31 March 1939, encl. intelligence assessment on Poland; note for Wilson from Ismay, 31 March 1939, encl.

As an immediate response of English diplomacy, on 31 March, in the House of Commons, Chamberlain announced a guarantee of Polish independence, which was also agreed to by the French government a few days later. No military strike materialized, and the British assumed that the Polish military mobilization and guarantee would force Hitler to withdraw, a view that encouraged greater firmness in British policy during the summer months.

Under these conditions, Danzig was no longer regarded by anyone as a problem so that: *"Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote a note on the Danzig question for his cabinet on May 5, 1939, showing that the problem was now one of German ambitions to dominate Europe on the one hand, and the Polish determination to defend its independence on the other. Although the way to a freely negotiated settlement of Danzig was still open, a compromise was now, he believed, "unlikely"¹⁸.*

All parties ultimately involved in the August and September crisis that led to world war were headed straight for the conflict.

Poland was determined not to give in to German demands and was armed with an international guarantee to reinforce this resolve: *"On 3 April, in reaction to this guarantee, Hitler had finally ordered preparations for the 'White Case' (invasion of Poland) to be completed by September 1.*

He was determined to ensure that a breach was opened between Poland and the Western powers over the summer to ensure that the war with Poland did not escalate. On May 23, he told his military commanders: "The task is to isolate Poland. The success of the isolation is decisive. . . It must not reach a simultaneous confrontation with the West"¹⁹.

Hitler's belief was that when it came to a test of will, the West would give in and withdraw from a crisis situation.

For their part, the British and French governments, although far from unanimous about waging a European war, publicly made their position clear again and again during the summer of 1939: if Germany acted unilaterally on Poland, it would honor the guarantee coming to the aid of Poland.

report from the Deputy Director of Military Intelligence, 'Germany's intentions regarding DANZIG – 30 March 1939', apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ NA, PREM 1/331a, memorandum by the Secretary of State, 'Danzig', 5 May 1939, pp. 5, 8, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ Schenk, *Hitlers Mann in Danzig*, pp. 104-105; *ADAP*, Serie D, Band VI, p. 479, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

It was hoped that evidence of Western firmness would now act to deter Hitler or force him to negotiate without threats. This hope, though it seemed slim at the time, was also a visible thread through the crisis that led to the war. Both sides exploited classified information that seemed to support the idea that the other side would give in at the last minute.

However, in every state preparations for war were accelerated to be ready in case the worst should happen.

Conscription was introduced in Britain, in April 1939 recruitment began and talks with the Anglo-French General Staff were initiated in March with a view to waging a three-year war against Germany.

The Western powers were not enthusiastic about Poland as an ally, but the real aim of Western policy was to deter or restrain further German action in any part of Europe and to use Poland as a zone of resistance.

Discussions between Britain and France eventually led to a plan in which an independent Poland would be reconstituted only after prolonged hostilities had ended, thus forcing the Poles into an early defeat²⁰.

When Polish leaders appealed to Britain and France for financial aid for their future war effort, the requests were treated with indifference. Beck asked for a loan at the end of April to enable Poland to buy raw materials and weapons, and in May a figure of £60 million was suggested.

“Further sums were requested in Paris, where initially there was more interest in lending. The British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, told Chamberlain that the idea of saving Polish rearmament was “really impossible” because Britain’s own financial position was weakened by heavy military spending. The British government was prepared to offer about one-tenth of the amount requested, but only on July 24 was this concession made, and only if the 8 million pounds offered were spent on British goods”²¹.

²⁰The so-called “War Plan” for a three-year war was already under discussion in March and was agreed in the British War Cabinet a few days after the outbreak of war. See NA, AIR 9/105, Chief of Staff, „British Strategic Memorandum”, March 20, 1939; PREM 1/377, Minute on war aims, 9 September 1939, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.* Planning was to be based *“on the assumption that the war would last three years or more”*.

²¹ NA, PREM 1/357, FO memorandum, ‘The Polish request for Financial Assistance for military purposes’, 9 May 1939; aide memoire from Polish ambassador, 12 May 1939; memorandum for the prime minister from Sir John Simon, 15 May 1939; Simon to Halifax, 24 July 1939, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

The reluctance of the British also infected the French, who gave up on granting financial aid to Poland. So Poland was left to fend for itself.

Although Hitler doubted Western resolve, by August 1939 it was clear that the Polish question was unlikely to be resolved in Germany's favor without a deeper crisis than that generated the previous year over Czechoslovakia. To ensure Poland's isolation, Hitler authorized closer approaches to the Soviet Union, whose position on the Polish crisis was uncertain. Britain and France also made overtures to Stalin in the hope that a renewed understanding between the three powers (the Entente) would be enough to deter Hitler once and for all.

4. The price of cooperation with the Soviet Union (Stalin)

No Western state made serious or successful attempts to cement a military or political agreement with the Soviet Union, and none could persuade Poland to cooperate because the Polish government rightly doubted Soviet goodwill and would not accept Soviet troops on Polish soil.

"This failure has since been regarded as the greatest lost opportunity of the pre-war years. The pacifist French foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, later blamed Beck's "incomprehensible, arrogant and treacherous attitude" for destroying the chance of an alliance with the Soviets.

Lord Halifax, reflecting on the matter in an article written during the war but not published, understood the matter more clearly: "An intelligent rabbit," he wrote, "would not be expected to welcome the protection of an animal ten times his size, which he credited with the habits of a boa constrictor"²².

From Poland's point of view, the price of Soviet cooperation could have been as expensive as the failure to secure it.

Ultimately, Stalin was more attracted to the idea of neutrality in any European conflict and the prospect of securing Soviet control over Eastern European territories, so he accepted a pact with Hitler's Germany. Although it has been argued that Stalin was forced into a pact he did not want, not least by historians who see the Soviet commitment to some form of collective security as a genuine desire to cooperate with the West, the evidence is overwhelmingly that the Soviet leadership toyed with the idea of

²² G. Bonnet, *Quai d'Orsay* (Isle of Man, 1965), p. 251; Borthwick Archive, University of York, Halifax papers, A4.410.12/1, 'Foreign Policy 1938-9: an unpublished note' [n.d.], p. 3, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

a Western alliance in order to pressure Germany into making an agreement that would offer real concessions to the Soviet side.

No state considered Poland as a permanent political element.

Polish territory had been divided between the Germans and Russians since the 18th century, and the new state was only twenty years old. The destruction of Poland was an acceptable outcome for both sides.

The subsequent story of Ribbentrop's dramatic flight to Moscow on August 22 is well known.

"The resulting non-aggression pact, signed in the early morning of August 24, and the secret protocol deciding the division of Poland and the Baltic states into spheres of influence was hailed by Hitler as a diplomatic triumph of profound significance.

He expected to hear imminently of the surrender of the British and French governments.

The absence of a Soviet threat added strength to his belief that the West would not fight for Poland. "Our enemies," he told his commanders in an August 22 conference, "are little worms. I saw them in Munich"²³.

It is worth asking: who wanted war in 1939? Most Europeans certainly did not. Hitler certainly did, because he wanted to avoid any impression of weakness on his part once he decided to prepare for the Polish invasion. He was well aware that over Munich he had been frustrated in attempting a small war against the Czechs; in front of his military commanders he had been forced to make compromises.

But he wanted war on his own terms, preferably a local war with Poland. Ribbentrop echoed his master's voice, blaming the Poles for their intransigence and threatening any kind of war.

In a June 12 1939 conversation with the League's Commissioner for Danzig, the Swiss historian Carl Burckhardt stated that: *"Ribbentrop said that Poland would be defeated in three days, and if France intervened "she would be reduced to the status of third grade". , and if Britain followed suit,*

²³ H. Michaelis and E. Schraepler (eds.), *Ursachen und Folgen vom deutschen Zusammenbruch 1918 und 1945 bis zur staatlichen Neuordnung Deutschlands in der Gegenwart* (Berlin, n.d.), Vol.xiii, p. 481, Niederschrift über die Aussprache Adolf Hitlers, 22 August 1939. On the fall of Western governments see L. E. Hill (ed.), *Die Weizsdcker-Papiere 1933-1950* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), p.159, diary entry for 23 August 1939, apud Richard Overly, *op.cit.*

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*"the British Empire would also be crushed", while Germany would fight "to the last woman and to the last child"*²⁴.

It is not easy to judge what Western leaders made of such wild threats when Burckhardt told them a few days later, as Ribbentrop had expected.

A transcript of the conversation was shown to Chamberlain, who wrote in the margin of the document that he *"found it difficult to come to any conclusion from such idle chatter"*²⁵.

Neville Chamberlain is often painted as a man who sought any way to avoid conflict in 1939, but although he always believed that peace was preferable to war, he had few illusions about Hitler until early 1939. In March, he described Hitler to a guest as *"the blackest devil he had ever met"*²⁶.

He did not want war, but he recognized its obvious possibility and, along with much of the British public, was ready to accept its necessity if Hitler continued to behave nonsensically.

The French Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, and most of the French population shared this fatalistic view. In no case can it be shown that they ever contemplated abandoning Poland if Germany acted as the aggressor. But in Poland, where tension between Poles and ethnic Germans reached a fever pitch during the summer of 1939, a serious alternative to fighting seems never to have been considered.

When British General Sir Edmund Ironside visited Poland in July 1939 to inspect the armed forces and war plans, he reported "an army leadership 'full of confidence' supported by their shared memories of defeating the Red Army as younger men in 1920. Ironside declared that *"the whole nation is determined to fight," an attitude he attributed to a "crazy spirit of optimism" among the Polish people"*²⁷.

²⁴ NA, PREM 1/331a, R. Makins (FO), 'Record of conversation with M. Burckhardt', 12 June 1939, p. 4, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ Magdalene College, Cambridge, Inge papers, Vol. 36, diary 1938-9, entry for 16 March 1939, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

²⁷ NA, PREM 1/331a, War Office to prime minister, August 1939, encl. 'General Ironside's Report on conditions in Poland, 28 July 1939', p. 3, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

In the same note of confidence and optimism the Polish ambassador in Washington told the American leaders that "*the Polish cavalry will carry the war on German soil with a reasonable prospect of success*"²⁸.

5. The courage and patriotism of the Polish population was evident.

American journalist William Shirer, who visited the Polish port of Gdynia in August 1939, found ordinary dock workers equipped for war: "*We are ready, we will fight*"²⁹.

All of this suggests that war in September 1939 was inevitable, and there were many Europeans at the time who believed that it was. There was certainly room for negotiation on the status of Danzig, which the Poles and their allies left open as long as the German leadership would accept an equal negotiation without threats. But for war to be avoided, one of three things had to happen: Hitler would have to withdraw from the war again, as he had done in Munich, and accept an internationally agreed settlement of the Polish-German disputes ; or the Polish leaders should have accepted that war with Germany was an irrational option and agreed to revise the status of Danzig and the western border with Germany; or the British and French leaders, either jointly or alone, had to give up the guarantee and give Germany an effective free hand in Eastern Europe. Although none of these positions were likely, they were alternatives.

The resolve of all parties to the conflict was tested to the extreme in the ten extraordinary days of drama that separated the conclusion of the German-Soviet pact in the early morning of August 24 and the late afternoon of September 3, when France joined the Great Britain to declare war on Germany.

The outbreak of war was sealed by decisions made under the immense pressure of knowing that Europe was at risk of being plunged back into a conflict that many feared would mean the eclipse of European civilization.

²⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, President's Secretary's File, Box 47, State Department to Roosevelt encl. 'Record of Conversation between Under Secretary of State and Polish ambassador, 9 Aug 1939', p. 3, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

²⁹ W. L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941* (London, 1941), p. 143, entry for 13 August 1939, apud Richard Overy, *op.cit.*

In the end, solving the crisis fell to a handful of men forced, whether they liked it or not, to act out a drama that involved the lives of millions of ordinary Europeans.

Conclusions

Regarding the origins of the war in Europe, there is no unanimously accepted opinion because the principles of analysis are not uniformly established either.

Most historians trace the origins of World War II back to the earlier "world war". Indeed, they argue that World War II cannot be clearly distinguished from World War I: what Europeans experienced was a twentieth-century "thirty years' war." Perhaps we do not want to go so far into the depths of history, but it is true that imposing the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) on the defeated powers and forcing them to mortgage their economies through a reparations bill, subjectively determined by the great powers victorious, it may represent a landmark for another major conflict. As one historian said: "*Powers will be powers*"³⁰.

In other words, it was inevitable that Germany would seek to regain what it considered its rightful place in the world.

Today there is an even more pressing reason to speak and write about such events: among us is a new generation that knows little or nothing of this war. We are in danger of "forgetting". As the survivors gradually die, their memory is overtaken by the stories told by the victors and (most disturbingly) by "war deniers" – powerful groups with their own far-right political agendas. There is also the threat that translating the "war" into another story of battles and strategies will dilute its horror. The sanitization of war data in some military histories is dangerous. The mass slaughter becomes a gentle "body count" recital.

The anonymous enumeration of millions of men, women, and children killed or wounded, the numbing statistics estimating the proportion of cities destroyed, and the meaningless recital of the might of various armaments can distract us from the victims.

A similar process of dehumanization allowed atrocious wartime behavior to occur.

When Joseph Stalin (dictator of the USSR) joked that "*one death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic*", he was drawing attention to a very

³⁰ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 9.

frightening possibility regarding the visions of the leaders and the possible effects of war.

In the perhaps inaccurate words of the historian Simon Dubnov, just before he was killed by a Lithuanian policeman during the destruction of the Riga ghetto: "*Good people, don't forget, good people, tell your story*"³¹, we find the call to know the truth.

I took the liberty of quoting Karl Kraus³² at the end of this article because the quote expresses the meaning of war in a way that could not be clearer: "*In the beginning, war means everyone's hope that later it will be better; then there is the expectation that it will be worse for the other; then the satisfaction that the other is not better off; at the end the surprise that both of them are not well*".



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³¹ A. Wieviorka, 'From Survivor to Witness: Voices from the Shoah', in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 125.

³² Karl Kraus, austrian writer and journalist, (of Jewish origin) poet, essayist, playwright, pamphleteer and an acclaimed author of satire and aphorisms of the Belle Époque, his irony targeting the German and Austrian press, culture and politics.

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