

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

HITLER AND THE ORIGINS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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I

IN the twenty years since the end of the war and the Nuremberg Trials, historical controversy has been largely concerned with the share of the other Powers in the responsibility for allowing war to break out in 1939. Thus, the British and French Governments of the 1930s have been blamed for their policy of appeasement and for failing to secure an agreement with Russia; Mussolini for his alliance with Hitler; Stalin for the Nazi-Soviet Pact; the Poles for the illusions which encouraged them to believe that they could hold Russia as well as Germany at arm's length. Taking a wider sweep, historians have turned for an explanation of the origins of the Second World War to the mistakes made in the peace settlement that followed the First; to the inadequacies of British and French policy between the wars; the retreat of the United States into isolation; the exclusion of the Soviet Union; the social effects of the Great Depression, and so on.

All this is necessary work, in order to establish the historical situation in which the war began, but as the catalogue grows, I find myself asking what is left of the belief universally held outside Germany twenty years ago that the primary responsibility for the war rested on Hitler and the Nazis?

No one suggests that theirs was the sole responsibility. Hitler would never have got as near to success as he did if it had not been for the weakness, the divisions, the opportunism of the other governments, which allowed him to build up such power that he could not be prevented from conquering Europe without a major war. Still, there is a lot of difference between failing to stop aggression, even hoping to derive side profits from it—and aggression itself. Indeed, much of the criticism directed at the other Powers for their failure to stop Hitler in time would fall to the ground if there proved to have been nothing to stop.

Is the effect of filling in the historical picture to reduce this difference to the point where it no longer appears so important, where the responsibility for the war becomes dispersed, or is shifted on to the shortcomings of an anarchical system of international relations, or of militarism or of capitalism, as happened after the First World War? Is Mr. A. J. P. Taylor¹ the harbinger of a new generation of revisionist historians who will find it as anachronistic to hold Hitler—or anyone else—responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War as to hold the Kaiser responsible for the outbreak of the First?

The question is an important one, for to an extent which we only begin to realize when it is questioned, the accepted version of European history in the years between 1933 and 1945 has been built round a particular view of Hitler and of the character of German foreign policy, and if the centrepiece were removed, far more than our view of Hitler and German foreign policy would have to be revised—our view of the foreign policies of all the Powers and of the substantiality of the dangers which the other governments, and their critics, believed they confronted.

It occurred to me, therefore, when I was invited to deliver this lecture, that it would be interesting to take a fresh look at Hitler's foreign policy in the light of the new evidence that has become available in the twenty years since the Nuremberg Trials (and, no less important, of new ways of looking at familiar evidence) and then to go on and ask, in what sense, if at all, it is still possible to speak of Hitler's and the Nazis' responsibility for what became a Second World War.

II

There are two contrasted versions of Hitler's foreign policy which for convenience's sake I will call the fanatic and the opportunist.

The first² fastens upon Hitler's racist views and his insistence that the future of the German people could be secured, neither by economic development nor by overseas colonization, not even

¹ In *The Origins of the Second World War* (rev. ed. 1963). See also the article by T. W. Mason, 'Some Origins of the Second World War', in *Past and Present*, no. 29, Dec. 1964, and Mr. Taylor's reply in the same journal, no. 30, Apr. 1965. For a German view of Mr. Taylor's book, see the review article by Gottard Jasper in *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, July 1962, pp. 311–40.

² This view is well stated by Professor H. R. Trevor-Roper in an article 'Hitlers Kriegsziele', *ibid.*, Apr. 1960.

by the restoration of Germany's 1914 frontiers, but only by the conquest of living space (*Lebensraum*) in Eastern Europe. Here the scattered populations of Germans living outside the Reich could be concentrated, together with the surplus population of the homeland, and a Germanic empire established, racially homogeneous, economically self-sufficient, and militarily impregnable. Such *Lebensraum* could only be obtained at the expense of Russia and the states bordering on her and could only be won and cleared of its existing population by force, a view which coincided with Hitler's belief in struggle as the law of life, and war as the test of a people's racial superiority.

Hitler first set these views down in *Mein Kampf*, elaborated them in his so-called *Zweites Buch*,¹ and repeated them on almost every occasion when we have a record of him talking privately and not in public, down to the Table Talk of the 1940s² and his final conversations with Bormann in the early months of 1945³ when his defeat could no longer be disguised. Not only did he consistently hold and express these views over twenty years, but in 1941 he set to work to put them into practice in the most literal way, by attacking Russia and by giving full rein to his plans, which the S.S. had already begun to carry out in Poland, for the resettlement of huge areas of Eastern Europe.

The alternative version⁴ treats Hitler's talk of *Lebensraum* and racist empire in the East as an expression of the fantasy side of his personality and fastens on the opportunism of Hitler's actual conduct of foreign policy. In practice—so this version runs—Hitler was an astute and cynical politician who took advantage of the mistakes and illusions of others to extend German power along lines entirely familiar from the previous century of German history. So little did he take his own professions seriously that he actually concluded a pact with the Bolsheviks whom he had denounced, and when Hitler belatedly began to put his so-called programme into practice, it marked the point at which he lost the capacity to distinguish between fantasy and reality and, with it, the opportunist's touch which

¹ Written in 1928 but not published until 1961. An English translation has been published by Grove Press Inc., N.Y., *Hitler's Secret Book*. This book is almost entirely concerned with foreign policy.

² An English version, *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-44*, was published in 1953, with an introduction by H. R. Trevor-Roper.

³ *The Testament of Adolf Hitler. The Hitler-Bormann Documents* (London, 1961).

⁴ For this view, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*.

had been responsible for his long run of successes. Thereafter he suffered nothing but one disaster after another.

These two versions of Hitler's foreign policy correspond to alternative versions of his personality. The first stresses his insistence on a fanatical will, force, and brutality of purpose, his conviction that he was a man of destiny, his reliance on intuition, his scorn for compromise, his declaration after the occupation of the Rhineland: 'I go the way that Providence dictates with the assurance of a sleepwalker.'¹

The second takes this no more seriously than the rest of Nazi and Fascist rhetoric and insists that in practice Hitler relied for his success upon calculation, total lack of scruple, and remarkable gifts as an actor. The suggestion that his opponents had to deal with a man who was fanatical in his purposes and would stop at nothing to accomplish them was part of the act, and a very successful part. His threats were carefully timed as part of a war of nerves, his ungovernable rages turned on or off as the occasion demanded, his hypnotic stare and loss of control part of a public *persona* skilfully and cynically manipulated. And when Hitler, carried away by his triumphs, himself began to believe in his own myth, and no longer to manipulate it, success deserted him.

It is a mistake, however, I believe, to treat these two contrasting views as alternatives, for if that is done, then, whichever alternative is adopted, a great deal of evidence has to be ignored. The truth is, I submit, that they have to be combined and that Hitler can only be understood if it is realized that he was at once both fanatical *and* cynical; unyielding in his assertion of will-power *and* cunning in calculation; convinced of his role as a man of destiny *and* prepared to use all the actor's arts in playing it. To leave out either side, the irrational or the calculating, is to fail to grasp the combination which marks Hitler out from all his imitators.

The same argument, I believe, applies to Hitler's foreign policy which combined consistency of aim with complete opportunism in method and tactics. This is, after all, a classical receipt for success in foreign affairs. It was precisely because he knew where he wanted to go that Hitler could afford to be opportunistic and saw how to take advantage of the mistakes and fears of others. Consistency of aim on Hitler's part has been confused with a time-table, blueprint, or plan of action fixed in

¹ 14 Mar. 1936, in a speech at Munich. For the context, cf. Max Domarus, *Hitler, Reden und Proklamationen*, vol. 1 (Würzburg, 1962), p. 606.

advance, as if it were pinned up on the wall of the General Staff offices and ticked off as one item succeeded another. Nothing of the sort. Hitler frequently improvised, kept his options open to the last possible moment, and was never sure until he got there which of several courses of action he would choose. But this does not alter the fact that his moves followed a logical (though not a predetermined) course—in contrast to Mussolini, an opportunist who snatched eagerly at any chance that was going but never succeeded in combining even his successes into a coherent policy.

III

Hitler had established his power inside Germany by the late summer of 1934. By securing the succession to President Hindenburg, he became Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces as well as leader of the only party in the country and head of a government in which no one dared to oppose him. From now on, apart from the one thing which he put before everything else, his own supremacy, Hitler took no great interest in internal affairs or administration. He turned his attention almost wholly to foreign policy and rearmament.

Shortly after he became Chancellor, on 3 February 1933, Hitler had met the leaders of the armed forces privately and told them that, once his political power was secure, his most important task would be to rearm Germany and then move from the revision of the Versailles Treaty to the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the East.¹

Just over a year later, on 28 February 1934, Hitler repeated this at a conference of Army and S.A. leaders, declaring that here was a decisive reason for rejecting Roehm's plan for a national militia and for rebuilding the German Army. The Western Powers would never allow Germany to conquer *Lebensraum* in the East. 'Therefore, short decisive blows to the West and then to the East could be necessary', tasks which could only be carried out by an army rigorously trained and equipped with the most modern weapons.²

¹ General Liebmann's note of Hitler's speech on this occasion is reprinted in *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, Oct. 1954, pp. 434-5. Cf. K. D. Bracher, W. Sauer, and G. Schulz, *Die Nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung* (Köln, 1962), p. 748, and Robert J. O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-1939* (London, 1966), pp. 125-6.

² A report of Hitler's speech on this occasion, made by Field Marshal von Weichs, is printed by O'Neill, *ibid.*, pp. 39-42. For further discussion of

None the less, in the first two years, 1933 and 1934, Hitler's foreign policy was cautious. Politically, he had still to establish his own supremacy at home. Diplomatically, Germany was isolated and watched with suspicion by all her neighbours. Militarily, she was weak and unable to offer much resistance if the French or the Poles should take preventive action against the new régime.

These were all excellent reasons for Hitler to protest his love of peace and innocence of aggressive intentions. As he told Rauschning, now that Germany had left Geneva, he would more than ever speak 'the language of the League'.¹ There is, in fact, a striking parallel between his conduct of foreign policy in this early period and the tactics of 'legality' which he had pursued in his struggle for power inside Germany. By observing the forms of legality, staying within the framework of the constitution, and refusing to make a *Putsch*—which would have brought the Nazis into open conflict with the Army—Hitler was able to turn the weapons of democracy against democracy itself. His appeal to Wilsonian principles of national self-determination and equality of rights had precisely the same effect—and those who believed him were to be as sharply disillusioned as those who supposed Hitler would continue to observe the limits of legality in Germany once he had acquired the power to ignore them.

Although Nazi propaganda made the most of them, none of Hitler's foreign policy moves in his first two years did much to improve Germany's position. Leaving the Disarmament Conference and the League was a gesture; the Pact with Poland clever but unconvincing, and more than counter-balanced by Russia's agreement to join the League and start negotiations for an alliance with France. The hurried repudiation of the Austrian Nazis in 1934 was humiliating, and the Saar plebiscite in January 1935 was largely a foregone conclusion. When Hitler announced the reintroduction of conscription in March 1935, Germany's action was condemned by the British, French, and Italian governments meeting at Stresa, as well as by the League Council, and was answered by the conclusion of pacts between Russia and France, and Russia and France's most reliable ally Czechoslovakia.²

the reliability of this report see Bracher, Sauer, and Schulz, *op. cit.*, p. 749, n. 14.

¹ Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler Speaks* (London, 1939), p. 116.

² A critical review of Hitler's foreign policy in these years is made by

Between 1935 and 1937, however, the situation changed to Hitler's advantage, and he was able not only to remove the limitations of the Versailles Treaty on Germany's freedom of action but to break out of Germany's diplomatic isolation.

It is true that the opportunities for this were provided by the other Powers: for example, by Mussolini's Abyssinian adventure and the quarrel to which this led between Italy and the Western Powers. But Hitler showed skill in using the opportunities which others provided, for example, in Spain where he reduced the policy of non-intervention to a farce and exploited the civil war for his own purposes with only a minimum commitment to Franco. He also provided his own opportunities: for example, the offer of a naval treaty to Britain in 1935 and the military reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936. This was a bold and risky stroke of bluff, taken against the advice of his generals, without anything like sufficient forces to resist the French if they had marched, and accompanied by a brilliantly contrived diversion in the form of the new peace pacts which he offered simultaneously to the other Locarno Powers.

Of course, there were failures—above all, Ribbentrop's failure to get an alliance with Britain. But between April 1935, when the Powers, meeting at Stresa, had unanimously condemned German rearmament, and Mussolini's state visit to Germany as a prospective ally in September 1937, Hitler could claim with some justification to have transformed Germany's diplomatic position and ended her isolation.

IV

The German Foreign Ministry and diplomatic service were well suited to the international equivalent of the policy of 'legality', but Hitler soon began to develop instruments of his own for a new style of foreign policy.¹ One was the Nazi groups among the Volksdeutsche living abroad. The two most obvious examples are the Nazi Party in Austria and Henlein's *Sudeten-deutsche Partei* in Czechoslovakia. The former had to be hastily disavowed in the summer of 1934, when the *Putsch* against Dollfuss failed, but the subsidies to the Austrian Nazis continued

K. D. Bracher in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Jan. 1957: 'Das Anfangsstadium der Hitlerschen Außenpolitik' (pp. 63-76).

¹ I am indebted in this section to Dr. H. A. Jacobsen who allowed me to see a forthcoming article: 'Programm und Struktur der nationalsozialistischen Außenpolitik 1919-1939.'

and so did the many links across the frontier from Munich and Berlin. Henlein's Sudeten Party was also secretly in receipt of subsidies from Germany from early 1935,¹ and was to play a key role in the campaign against Czechoslovakia. These links were maintained outside the regular Foreign Ministry system and there were a number of Nazi agencies—Bohle's *Auslandsorganisation*, Rosenberg's *Außenpolitisches Amt*, VOMI (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*) competing with each other, and with the Foreign Ministry, to organize the German-speaking groups living abroad.

At the same time Hitler began to make use of envoys from outside the foreign service for the most important diplomatic negotiations: Goering, for instance, who frequently undertook special missions to Italy, Poland, and the Balkans, and Ribbentrop whose Büro, originally set up to deal with disarmament questions in 1933, soon moved into direct competition with the *Auswärtiges Amt*. It was Ribbentrop who negotiated the naval treaty with London; Ribbentrop who was given the key post of ambassador in London in order to secure a British alliance; Ribbentrop who represented Germany on the Non-Intervention Committee, who negotiated and signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan in 1936 and a year later brought in Italy as well.

It was not until the beginning of 1938 that Hitler appointed Ribbentrop as Foreign Minister: until then he left the German Foreign Ministry and diplomatic service as a respectable façade but increasingly took the discussion of policy and the decisions out of their hands and used other agents to carry them out. In Hitler's eyes the diplomats—like the generals, as he came to feel during the war—were too conservative, too preoccupied with the conventional rules of the game to see the advantages of scrapping rules altogether and taking opponents by surprise. Hitler's radicalism required a new style in the conduct of foreign affairs as different from old style diplomacy as the Nazi Party was from the old style political parties of the Weimar Republic.

This new style did not emerge clearly until 1938–9, but there were unmistakable signs of it before then in the changed tone in which Hitler and German propaganda were speaking by 1937. Hitler receiving Mussolini and showing off the strength of the new Germany,² Hitler beginning to talk of Germany's 'demands',

¹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series C, vol. 3, no. 509.

² Mussolini's visit to Germany took place in the last ten days of Sept. 1937

was speaking a very different language from that of the man who only three or four years before had used all his gifts as an orator to convince the world of Germany's will to peace. German national pride and self-confidence had been restored, and, instead of trying to conceal, Nazi propaganda now boasted of her growing military strength.

V

The Nazis' claims about German rearmament were widely believed. Phrases like 'Guns before butter'—'total war'—'a war economy in peacetime' made a deep impression. When Goering was appointed Plenipotentiary for the Four Year Plan in October 1936, this was taken to mean the speeding up of rearmament, and Hitler's secret memorandum to Goering found among Speer's papers after the war confirms this view.¹ Irritated by Schacht's opposition to his demands, he declared that the shortage of raw-materials was 'not an economic problem, but solely a question of will'. A clash with Bolshevik Russia was unavoidable: 'No State will be able to withdraw or even remain at a distance from this historical conflict. . . . We cannot escape this destiny.'

Hitler concluded his memorandum to Goering with the words:

I thus set the following task:

1. The German Army must be operational (*einsatzfähig*) within 4 years.
2. The German economy must be fit for war (*kriegsfähig*) within 4 years.

Yet the evidence now available does not bear out the widespread belief in Germany's all-out rearmament before 1939.²

and left an indelible impression on the Italian dictator. A few weeks later, in Nov. 1937, Mussolini agreed to sign the Anti-Comintern Pact, a further step in committing himself to an alliance with Hitler.

¹ It is printed in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series C, vol. 5, no. 490. Cf. Gerhard Meinck, *Hitler und die deutsche Aufrüstung*. (Wiesbaden, 1959), p. 164. Meinck's book is a valuable guide to the problems connected with German rearmament. Reference should also be made to Georg Tessin, *Formationsgeschichte der Wehrmacht 1933-39*, Schriften des Bundesarchivs, Bd. 7 (Boppard/Rhein, 1959). A convenient summary is provided by O'Neill, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

² The evidence has been admirably summarized and reviewed by Alan S. Milward in *The German Economy at War* (London, 1965). Further details are to be found in Burton H. Klein, *Germany's Economic Preparations for War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

The figures show that the rearmament programme took a long time to get under way and did not really begin to produce the results Hitler wanted until 1939. Even then Germany's military superiority was not as great as both public opinion and the Allies' intelligence services assumed.

The really surprising fact, however, is the scale of German rearmament in relation to Germany's economic resources. At no time before September 1939 was anything like the full capacity of the German economy devoted to war production. The figures are well below what German industry could have achieved if fully mobilized, below what German industry had achieved in 1914-18, and below what was achieved by the British when they set about rearmament in earnest.

The immediate conclusion which one might well draw from these facts is that they provide powerful support for the argument that Hitler was not deliberately preparing for war but was thinking in terms of an armed diplomacy in which he relied on bluff and the *threat* of war to blackmail or frighten the other Powers into giving way to his demands.

Before we accept this conclusion, however, it is worth while to carry the examination of the rearmament figures beyond the date of 1 September 1939. The attack on Poland may or may not have been due to mistaken calculation on Hitler's part (I shall come back to this later), but no one can doubt that the German attack on France and the Low Countries on 10 May 1940 was deliberate, not hastily improvised but prepared for over a six months' period. And this time it was an attack not on a second-class power like Poland but on two major Powers, France and Britain. Yet the interesting fact is that the proportion of Germany's economic resources devoted to the war hardly went up at all. Even more striking, the same is true of the attack on Russia in 1941. In preparation for Operation Barbarossa, the Army was built up to 180 divisions, but this was not accompanied by an all-out armaments drive and on the very eve of the invasion of Russia (20 June 1941) Hitler actually ordered a reduction in the level of arms production. This was put into effect and by December 1941, when the German Army was halted before Moscow, the over-all level of weapons production had fallen by 29 per cent. from its peak in July of that year.¹

In fact, it was not until 1942, the year in which Hitler lost the initiative and Germany was pushed on to the defensive, that

¹ Klein, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-5; Milward, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-5.

Hitler was persuaded to commit the full resources of the German economy to an all-out effort.

This puts the facts I have mentioned in a different light. For, if Hitler believed that he could defeat the Western Powers, subdue the Balkans, and conquer Russia without demanding more than a partial mobilization from the German people, then the fact that German rearmament before the war had limited rather than total objectives is no proof that his plans at that time did not include war.

The truth is that, both before and after September 1939, Hitler was thinking in terms of a very different sort of war from that which Germany had lost in 1914-18 or was to lose again between 1942 and 1945. With a shrewder judgement than many of his military critics, Hitler realized that Germany, with limited resources of her own and subject to a blockade, was always going to be at a disadvantage in a long-drawn-out general war. The sort of war she could win was a series of short campaigns in which surprise and the overwhelming force of the initial blow would settle the issue before the victim had time to mobilize his full resources or the other Powers to intervene. This was the sort of war the German Army was trained as well as equipped to fight, and all the German campaigns between 1939 and 1941 conformed to this pattern—Poland, four weeks; Norway, two months; Holland, five days, Belgium, seventeen; France, six weeks; Yugoslavia, eleven days; Greece, three weeks. The most interesting case of all is that of Russia. The explanation of why the German Army was allowed to invade Russia without winter clothing or equipment is Hitler's belief that even Russia could be knocked out by a blitzkrieg in four to five months, before the winter set in. And so convinced was Hitler that he had actually achieved this that in his directive of 14 July 1941¹ he spoke confidently of reducing the size of the Army, the Navy, and the armaments programme in the near future.

This pattern of warfare, very well adapted both to Germany's economic position and the advantages of secrecy and surprise enjoyed by a dictatorship, fits perfectly the pattern of German rearmament. What was required was not armament in depth, the long-term conversion of the whole economy to a war footing which (as in Britain) would only begin to produce results in two to three years, but a war economy of a different sort geared

¹ Reprinted in the English translation of Walter Hubatsch's *Hitlers Weisungen, Hitler's War Directives, 1939-45*, edited by H. R. Trevor-Roper (London, 1964), pp. 82-5.

(like German strategy) to the concept of the blitzkrieg. It was an economy which concentrated on a short-term superiority and the weapons which could give a quick victory, even when this meant neglecting the proper balance of a long-term armament programme. What mattered, as Hitler said in his 1936 memorandum, was not stocks of raw materials or building up productive capacity, but armaments ready for use, plus the will to use them. How near the gamble came to success is shown by the history of the years 1939-41 when Hitler's limited rearmament programme produced an army capable of overrunning the greater part of Europe, and very nearly defeating the Russians as well as the French.

VI

But we must not run ahead of the argument. The fact that Germany was better prepared for war, and when it began proceeded to win a remarkable series of victories, does not prove that Hitler intended to start the war which actually broke out in September 1939. We have still to relate Hitler's long-term plans for expansion in the East and his rearmament programme to the actual course of events in 1938 and 1939.

A starting-point is Colonel Hossbach's record of Hitler's conference with his three Commanders-in-Chief, War Minister, and Foreign Minister on 5 November 1937.¹ It was an unusual occasion, since Hitler rarely talked to more than one Commander-in-Chief or minister at a time, and he came nearer to laying down a programme than he ever had before. Once again he named *Lebensraum* in the East and the need to provide for Germany's future by continental expansion as the objective, but instead of leaving it at that, he went on to discuss how this was to be achieved.

The obstacles in the way were Britain and France, Germany's two 'hate-inspired antagonists'. Neither was as strong as she seemed: still, 'Germany's problems could only be solved by force and this was never without attendant risk.'

The peak of German power would be reached in 1943-5: after that, their lead in armaments would be reduced. 'It was while the rest of the world was preparing its defences that we were obliged to take the offensive.' Whatever happened, he was

¹ Text in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, vol. 1, no. 19. Cf. also Friedrich Hossbach, *Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler* (Hanover, 1949), pp. 207-20.

resolved to solve Germany's problem of space by 1943-5 at the latest. Hitler then discussed two possible cases in which action might be taken earlier—one was civil strife in France, disabling the French Army: the other, war in the Mediterranean which might allow Germany to act as early as 1938. The first objective in either case 'must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously in order to remove the threat to our flank in any possible operation against the West'. Hitler added the comment that almost certainly Britain and probably France as well had already tacitly written off the Czechs.

To speak of this November meeting as a turning-point in Hitler's foreign policy at which Hitler made an irreversible decision in favour of war seems to me as wide of the target as talking about time-tables and blueprints of aggression. Hitler was far too skilful a politician to make irreversible decisions in advance of events: no decisions were taken or called for.

But to brush the Hossbach meeting aside and say that this was just Hitler talking for effect and not to be taken seriously seems to me equally wide of the mark. The hypotheses Hitler outlined—civil strife in France, a Mediterranean war—did not materialize, but when Hitler spoke of his determination to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria, as early as 1938 if an opportunity offered, and when both countries *were* overthrown within less than eighteen months, it is stretching incredulity rather far to ignore the fact that he had stated this as his immediate programme in November 1937.

The next stage was left open, but Hitler foresaw quite correctly that everything would depend upon the extent to which Britain and France were prepared to intervene by force to prevent Germany's continental expansion and he clearly contemplated war if they did. Only when the obstacle which they represented had been removed would it be possible for Germany to carry out her eastward expansion.

This was a better forecast of the direction of events in 1938-41 than any other European leader including Stalin made at the end of 1937—for the very good reason that Hitler, however opportunist in his tactics, knew where he wanted to go, was almost alone among European leaders in knowing this, and so kept the initiative in his hands.

The importance of the Hossbach conference, I repeat, is not in recording a decision, but in reflecting the change in Hitler's attitude. If the interpretation offered of his policy in 1933-7 is correct, it was not a sudden but a gradual change, and a change

not in the objectives of foreign policy but in Hitler's estimate of the risks he could afford to take in moving more rapidly and openly towards them. As he told the Nazi Old Guard at Augsburg a fortnight later: 'I am convinced that the most difficult part of the preparatory work has already been achieved. . . . To-day we are faced with new tasks, for the *Lebensraum* of our people is too narrow.'¹

There is another point to be made about the Hossbach conference. Of the five men present besides Hitler and his adjutant Hossbach, Goering was certainly not surprised by what he heard and Raeder said nothing. But the other three, the two generals and Neurath, the Foreign Minister, showed some alarm and expressed doubts. It is surely another remarkable coincidence if this had nothing to do with the fact that within three months all three men had been turned out of office—the two generals, Blomberg and Fritsch, on bare-faced pretexts. There is no need to suppose that Hitler himself took the initiative in framing Blomberg or Fritsch. The initiative seems more likely to have come from Goering and Himmler, but it was Hitler who turned both Blomberg's *mésalliance* and the allegations against Fritsch to his own political advantage. Blomberg, the Minister of War, was replaced by Hitler himself who suppressed the office altogether, took over the OKW, the High Command of the armed forces, as his own staff and very soon made clear that neither the OKW nor the OKH, the High Command of the Army, would be allowed the independent position of the old General Staff. Fritsch, long regarded by Hitler as too stiff, conservative, and out of sympathy with Nazi ideas, was replaced by the much more pliable Brauchitsch as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and Neurath, a survivor from the original coalition, by Ribbentrop who made it as clear to the staff of the Foreign Ministry as Hitler did to the generals that they were there to carry out orders, not to discuss, still less question the Fuehrer's policy.

VII

I find nothing at all inconsistent with what I have just said in the fact that the timing for the first of Hitler's moves, the annexation of Austria, should have been fortuitous and the preparations for it improvised on the spur of the moment in a matter of days, almost of hours. On the contrary, the *Anschluß*

¹ Speech at Augsburg, 21 Nov. 1937. Domarus, *op. cit.*, pp. 759–60.

seems to me to provide, almost in caricature, a striking example of that extraordinary combination of consistency in aim, calculation, and patience in preparation with opportunism, impulse, and improvisation in execution which I regard as characteristic of Hitler's policy.

The aim in this case was never in doubt: the demand for the incorporation of Austria in the Reich appears on the first page of *Mein Kampf*. After the Austrian Nazis' unsuccessful *Putsch* of 1934, Hitler showed both patience and skill in his relations with Austria: he gradually disengaged Mussolini from his commitment to maintain Austrian independence and at the same time steadily undermined that independence from within. By the beginning of 1938 he was ready to put on the pressure, but the invitation to Schuschnigg to come to Berchtesgaden was made on the spur of the moment as the result of a suggestion by an anxious Papen trying hard to find some pretext to defer his own recall from Vienna. When Schuschnigg appeared on 12 February, Hitler put on an elaborate act to frighten him into maximum concessions with the threat of invasion, but there is no reason to believe that either Hitler or the generals he summoned to act as 'stage extras' regarded these threats as anything other than bluff. Hitler was confident that he would secure Austria, without moving a man, simply by the appointment of his nominee Seyss-Inquart as Minister of the Interior and the legalization of the Austrian Nazis—to both of which Schuschnigg agreed.

When the Austrian Chancellor, in desperation, announced a plebiscite on 9 March, Hitler was taken completely by surprise. Furious at being crossed, he decided at once to intervene before the plebiscite could be held. But no plans for action had been prepared: they had to be improvised in the course of a single day, and everything done in such a hurry and confusion that 70 per cent. of the tanks and lorries, according to General Jodl, broke down on the road to Vienna. The confusion was even greater in the Reich Chancellery: when Schuschnigg called off the plebiscite, Hitler hesitated, then was persuaded by Goering to let the march in continue, but without any clear idea of what was to follow. Only when he reached Linz, did Hitler, by then in a state of self-intoxication, suddenly decide to annex Austria instead of making it a satellite state, and his effusive messages of relief to Mussolini show how unsure he was of the consequences of his action.

No doubt the *Anschluss* is an exceptional case. On later

occasions the plans were ready: dates by which both the Czech and the Polish crises must be brought to a solution were fixed well in advance, and nothing like the same degree of improvisation was necessary. But in all the major crises of Hitler's career there is the same strong impression of confusion at the top, springing directly (as his generals and aides complained) from his own hesitations and indecision. It is to be found in his handling of domestic as well as foreign crises—as witness his long hesitation before the Roehm purge of 1934—and in war as well as peacetime.

The paradox is that out of all this confusion and hesitation there should emerge a series of remarkably bold decisions, just as, out of Hitler's opportunism in action, there emerges a pattern which conforms to objectives stated years before.

VIII

The next crisis, directed against Czechoslovakia, was more deliberately staged. This time Hitler gave preliminary instructions to his staff on 21 April 1938¹ and issued a revised directive on 30 May.² Its first sentence read: 'It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future.' It was essential, Hitler declared, to create a situation within the first two or three days which would make intervention by other Powers hopeless: the Army and the Air Force were to concentrate all their strength for a knock-out blow and leave only minimum forces to hold Germany's other frontiers.

It is perfectly true that for a long time in the summer Hitler kept out of the way and left the other Powers to make the running, but this was only part of the game. Through Henlein and the Sudeten Party, who played the same role of fifth column as the Austrian Nazis, Hitler was able to manipulate the dispute between the Sudeten Germans and the Czech Government, which was the ostensible cause of the crisis, from within. At a secret meeting with Hitler on 28 March, Henlein summarized his policy in the words: 'We must always demand so much that we can never be satisfied.' The Fuehrer, says the official minute, approved this view.³

At the same time through a variety of devices—full-scale press and radio campaigns, the manufacture of incidents, troop

¹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, vol. 2, no. 133. Cf. also Series D, vol. 7, pp. 635–7.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 221.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 107.

movements, carefully circulated rumours, and diplomatic leaks, a steadily mounting pressure was built up, timed to culminate in Hitler's long-awaited speech at the Nuremberg Party Congress. Those who study only the diplomatic documents get a very meagre impression of the war of nerves which was maintained throughout the summer and which was skilfully directed to play on the fear of war in Britain and France and to heighten the Czechs' sense of isolation. It was under the pressure of this political warfare, something very different from diplomacy as it had been traditionally practised, that the British and French governments felt themselves impelled to act.

What was Hitler's objective? The answer has been much confused by the ambiguous use of the word 'war'.

Western opinion made a clear-cut distinction between peace and war: Hitler did not, he blurred the distinction. Reversing Clausewitz, he treated politics as a continuation of war by other means, at one stage of which (formally still called peace) he employed methods of political warfare—subversion, propaganda, diplomatic and economic pressure, the war of nerves—at the next, the threat of war, and so on to localized war and up the scale to general war—a continuum of force in which the different stages ran into each other. Familiar enough now since the time of the Cold War, this strategy (which was all of a piece with Hitler's radical new style in foreign policy) was as confusing in its novelty as the tactics of the Trojan horse, the fifth column, and the 'volunteers' to those who still thought in terms of a traditionally decisive break between a state of peace and a state of war.

So far as the events of 1938 go, there seem to be two possible answers to the question, What was in Hitler's mind?

The first is that his object was to destroy the Czech State by the sort of blitzkrieg for which he had rearmed Germany and which he was to carry out a year later against Poland. This was to come at the end of a six months' political, diplomatic, and propaganda campaign designed to isolate and undermine the Czechs, and to manoeuvre the Western Powers into abandoning them to their fate rather than risk a European war. The evidence for this view consists in the series of secret directives and the military preparations to which they led, plus Hitler's declaration on several occasions to the generals and his other collaborators that he meant to settle the matter by force, with 1 October as D-day. On this view, he was only prevented from

carrying out his attack by the intervention of Chamberlain which, however great the cost to the Czechs, prevented war or at least postponed it for a year.

The other view is that Hitler never intended to go to war, that his objective was from the beginning a political settlement such as was offered to him at Munich, that his military preparations were not intended seriously but were designed as threats to increase the pressure.

The choice between these two alternatives, however—*either* the one *or* the other—seems to me unreal. The obvious course for Hitler to pursue was to keep both possibilities open to the very last possible moment, the more so since they did not conflict. The more seriously the military preparations were carried out, the more effective was the pressure in favour of a political settlement if at the last moment he decided not to take the risks involved in a military operation. If we adopt this view, then we remove all the difficulties in interpreting the evidence which are created either by attempting to pin Hitler down on any particular declaration and say *now*, at this point, he had decided on war—or by the dogmatic assumption that Hitler *never* seriously contemplated the use of force, with the consequent need to dismiss his military directives as bluff.

Neither in 1938 nor in 1939 did Hitler deliberately plan to start a general European war. But this was a risk which could not be ignored, and in 1938 it was decisive. The generals were unanimous that Germany's rearmament had not yet reached the point where she could face a war with France and Britain. The Czech frontier defences were formidable. Their army on mobilization was hardly inferior at all, either in numbers or training, to the thirty-seven divisions which the Germans could deploy and it was backed by a first-class armaments industry.¹ To overcome these would require a concentration of force which left the German commander in the West with totally inadequate strength to hold back the French Army.

While the generals, however, added up divisions and struck an unfavourable balance in terms of material forces, Hitler was convinced that the decisive question was a matter of will, the balance between his determination to take the *risk* of a general war and the determination of the Western Powers, if pushed far enough, to take the *actual decision* of starting one. For, however much the responsibility for such a war might be Hitler's, by

¹ For the strength of the Czech forces, see David Vital, 'Czechoslovakia and the Powers', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 1, no. 4, Oct. 1966.

isolating the issue and limiting his demands to the Sudetenland, he placed the onus of actually starting a general war on the British and the French. How far was Hitler prepared to drive such an argument? The answer is, I believe, that while he had set a date by which he knew he must decide, until the very last moment he had not made up his mind and that it is this alternation between screwing up his demands, as he did at his second meeting with Chamberlain in Godesberg, and still evading an irrevocable decision, which accounts both for the zigzag course of German diplomacy and for the strain on Hitler.

In the end he decided, or was persuaded, to stop short of military operations against Czechoslovakia and 'cash' his military preparations for the maximum of political concessions.

No sooner had he agreed to this, however, than Hitler started to regret that he had not held on, marched his army in, then and there, and broken up the Czechoslovak State, not just annexed the Sudetenland. His regret sprang from the belief, confirmed by his meeting with the Western leaders at Munich, that he could have got away with a localized war carried out in a matter of days, and then confronted the British and French with a *fait accompli* while they were still hesitating whether to attack in the West—exactly as happened a year later over Poland.

Almost immediately after Munich, therefore, Hitler began to think about ways in which he could complete his original purpose. Every sort of excuse, however transparent, was found for delaying the international guarantee which had been an essential part of the Munich agreement. At the same time, the ground was carefully prepared with the Hungarians, who were eager to recover Ruthenia and at least part of Slovakia, and with the Slovaks themselves who were cast for the same role the Sudeten Germans had played the year before. The actual moment at which the crisis broke was not determined by Hitler and took him by surprise, but that was all. The Slovaks were at once prodded into declaring their independence and putting themselves in Hitler's hands. The Czech Government, after Hitler had threatened President Hacha in Berlin, did the same. The 'legality' of German intervention was unimpeachable: Hitler had been invited to intervene by both the rebels and the government. War had been avoided, no shots exchanged, peace preserved—yet the independent state of Czechoslovakia had been wiped off the map.

IX

Within less than eighteen months, then, Hitler had successfully achieved both the immediate objectives, Austria and Czechoslovakia, which he had laid down in the Hossbach meeting. He had not foreseen the way in which this would happen, in fact he had been wrong about it, but this had not stopped him from getting both.

This had been true at every stage of Hitler's career. He had no fixed idea in 1930, even in 1932, about how he would become Chancellor, only that he would; no fixed idea in 1934-5 how he would break out of Germany's diplomatic isolation, again only that he would. So the same now. Fixity of aim by itself, or opportunism by itself, would have produced nothing like the same results.

It is entirely in keeping with this view of Hitler that, after Czechoslovakia, he should not have made up his mind what to do next. Various possibilities were in the air. Another move was likely in 1939, if only because the rearmament programme was now beginning to reach the period when it would give Germany a maximum advantage and Hitler had never believed that time was on his side. This advantage, he said in November 1937, would only last, at the most until 1943-5; then the other Powers with greater resources would begin to catch up. He had therefore to act quickly if he wanted to achieve his objectives.

Objectives, yes; a sense of urgency in carrying them out, and growing means to do so in German rearmament, but no timetable or precise plan of action for the next stage.

Ribbentrop had already raised with the Poles, immediately after Munich, the question of Danzig and the Corridor. But there is no evidence that Hitler had committed himself to war to obtain these, or to the dismemberment of Poland. If the Poles had been willing to give him what he wanted, Hitler might well have treated them, for a time at any rate, as a satellite—in much the same way as he treated Hungary—and there were strong hints from Ribbentrop that the Germans and the Poles could find a common objective in action against Russia. Another possibility, if Danzig and the Corridor could be settled by agreement, was to turn west and remove the principal obstacle to German expansion, the British and French claim to intervene in Eastern Europe.

After Prague, the German-Polish exchanges became a good deal sharper and, given the Poles' determination not to be put

in the same position as the Czechs, but to say 'No' and refuse to compromise, it is likely that a breach between Warsaw and Berlin would have come soon in any case. But what precipitated it was the British offer, and Polish acceptance, of a guarantee of Poland's independence. In this sense the British offer is a turning-point in the history of 1939. But here comes the crux of the matter. If Mr. Taylor is right in believing that Hitler was simply an opportunist who reacted to the initiative of others, then he is justified in calling the British offer to Poland a revolutionary event.¹ But if the view I have suggested is right, namely, that Hitler, although an opportunist in his tactics, was an opportunist who had from the beginning a clear objective in view, then it is very much less than that: an event which certainly helped—if you like, forced—Hitler to make up his mind between the various possibilities he had been revolving, but which certainly did not provoke him into an expansionist programme he would not otherwise have entertained, or generate the force behind it which the Nazis had been building up ever since they came to power. On this view it was Hitler who still held the initiative, as he had since the *Anschluß*, and the British who were reacting to it, not the other way round: the most the British guarantee did was to give Hitler the answer to the question he had been asking since Munich, Where next?

The answer, then, was Poland, the most probable in any event in view of the demands the Nazis had already tabled, and now a certainty. But this did not necessarily mean war—yet.

Hitler expressed his anger by denouncing Germany's Non-Aggression Pact with Poland and the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, and went on to sign a secret directive ordering the Army to be ready to attack Poland by 1 September.² The military preparations were not bluff: they were designed to give Hitler the option of a military solution if he finally decided this way, or to strengthen the pressures for a political solution—either direct with Warsaw, or by the intervention of the other powers in a Polish Munich. Just as in 1938 so in 1939, Hitler kept the options open literally to the last, and until the troops actually crossed the Polish frontier on 1 September none of his generals was certain that the orders might not be changed. Both options, however: there is no more reason to say

¹ Taylor, *op. cit.*, ch. 10.

² International Military Tribunal Document C-120. Cf. also Walter Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters* (London, 1964), p. 20.

dogmatically that Hitler was aiming all the time at a political solution than there is to say that he ruled it out and had made up his mind in favour of war.

Hitler's inclination, I believe, was always towards a solution by force, the sort of localized blitzkrieg with which in the end he did destroy Poland. What he had to weigh was the risk of a war which could not be localized. There were several reasons why he was more ready to take this risk than the year before.

The first was the progress of German rearmament—which was coming to a peak in the autumn of 1939. By then it represented an eighteen-fold expansion of the German armed forces since 1933.¹ In economists' terms this was not the maximum of which Germany was capable, at least in the long run, but in military terms it was more than adequate, as 1940 showed, not just to defeat the Poles but to deal with the Western Powers as well. The new German Army had been designed to achieve the maximum effect at the outset of a campaign and Hitler calculated—quite rightly—that, even if the British formally maintained their guarantee to Poland, the war would be over and Poland crushed before they could do anything about it.²

A second reason was Hitler's increased confidence, his conviction that his opponents were simply not his equal either in daring or in skill. The very fact that he had drawn back at Munich and then regretted it made it all the more likely that a man with his gambler's temperament would be powerfully drawn to stake all next time.

Finally, Hitler believed that he could remove the danger of Western intervention, or at least render the British guarantee meaningless, by outbidding the Western Powers in Moscow.

In moments of exaltation, e.g. in his talks to his generals after the signature of the Pact with Italy (23 May) and at the conference of 22 August which followed the news that Stalin would sign, Hitler spoke as if the matter were settled, war with Poland inevitable, and all possibility of a political settlement—on his terms—excluded. I believe that this was, as I have said, his real inclination, but I do not believe that he finally made up his mind until the last minute. Why should he? Just as in 1938,

¹ O'Neill, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

² It is noticeable that there were far fewer doubts in the Army in 1939 than in 1938—and the major reason for this (apart from the fact that a war with Poland fitted in far better with the generals' traditionalist ideas than one with Czechoslovakia) was their belief that a war in 1939 involved fewer risks than in 1938.

Hitler refused to make in advance the choice to which historians have tried to pin him down, the either/or of war or a settlement dictated under the threat of war. He fixed the date by which the choice would have to be made but pursued a course which would leave him with the maximum of manoeuvre to the last possible moment. And again one may well ask, Why not—since the preparations to be made for either eventuality—war or a political settlement under the threat of war—were the same?

Much has been made of the fact that for the greater part of the summer Hitler retired to Berchtesgaden and made no public pronouncement. But this is misleading. The initiative remained in Hitler's hands. The propaganda campaign went ahead exactly as planned, building up to a crisis by late August and hammering on the question, Is Danzig worth a war? So did the military preparations which were complete by the date fixed, 26 August. German diplomacy was mobilized to isolate Poland and, if the pact with Italy proved to be of very little value in the event, and the Japanese failed to come up to scratch, the pact with Stalin was a major coup. For a summer of 'inactivity' it was not a bad result.

Hitler's reaction when the Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed shows clearly enough where his first choice lay. Convinced that the Western Powers would now give up any idea of intervention in defence of Poland, he ordered the German Army to attack at dawn on 26 August: i.e. a solution by force, but localized and without risk of a general European war, the sort of operation for which German rearmament had been designed from the beginning.

The unexpected British reaction, the confirmation instead of the abandonment of the guarantee to Poland—this, plus Mussolini's defection (and Mussolini at any rate had no doubt that Hitler was bent on a solution by force) upset Hitler's plans and forced him to think again. What was he to do? Keep up the pressure and hope that the Poles would crack and accept his terms? Keep up the pressure and hope that, if not the Poles, then the British would crack and either press the Poles to come to terms (another Munich) or abandon them? Or go ahead and take the risk of a general war, calculating that Western intervention, if it ever took place, would come too late to affect the outcome.

It is conceivable that if Hitler had been offered a Polish Munich, on terms that would by now have amounted to

capitulation, he would still have accepted it. But I find it hard to believe that any of the moves he made, or sanctioned, between 25 August and 1 September were seriously directed to starting negotiations. A far more obvious and simple explanation is to say that, having failed to remove the threat of British intervention by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, as he had expected, Hitler postponed the order to march and allowed a few extra days to see, not if war could be avoided, but whether under the strain a split might not develop between the Western Powers and Poland and so leave the Poles isolated after all.

Now the crisis had come, Hitler himself did little to resolve or control it. Characteristically, he left it to others to make proposals, seeing the situation, not in terms of diplomacy and negotiation, but as a contest of wills. If his opponents' will cracked first, then the way was open for him to do what he wanted and march into Poland without fear that the Western Powers would intervene. To achieve this he was prepared to hold on and bluff up to the very last minute, but if the bluff did not come off within the time he had set, then this time he steeled his will to go through with the attack on Poland even if it meant running the risk of war with Britain and France as well. All the accounts agree on the strain which Hitler showed and which found expression in his haggard appearance and temperamental outbursts. But his will held. This was no stumbling into war. It was neither misunderstanding nor miscalculation which sent the German Army over the frontier into Poland, but a calculated risk, the gambler's bid—the only bid, Hitler once told Goering, he ever made, *va banque*, the bid he made when he reoccupied the Rhineland in 1936 and when he marched into Austria, the bid he had failed to make when he agreed to the Munich conference, only to regret it immediately afterwards.

X

Most accounts of the origins of the war stop in September 1939. Formally, this is correct: from 3 September 1939 Germany was in a state of war with Britain and France as well as Poland, and the Second World War had begun. But this formal statement is misleading. In fact, Hitler's gamble came off. The campaign in which the German Army defeated the Poles remained a localized war and no hostilities worth speaking of had taken place between Germany and the Western Powers by

the time the Poles had been defeated and the state whose independence they had guaranteed had ceased to exist.

If Hitler had miscalculated at the beginning of September or stumbled into war without meaning to, here was the opportunity to avoid the worst consequences of what had happened. It is an interesting speculation what the Western Powers would have done, if he had really made an effort to secure peace once the Poles were defeated. But it is a pointless speculation. For Hitler did nothing of the sort. The so-called peace offer in his speech of 6 October was hardly meant to be taken seriously. Instead of limiting his demands, Hitler proceeded to destroy the Polish State and to set in train (in 1939, not in 1941) the ruthless resettlement programme which he had always declared he would carry out in Eastern Europe.

Even more to the point, it was Hitler who took the initiative in turning the formal state of war between Germany and the Western Powers into a real war. On 9 October he produced a memorandum in which he argued that, instead of waiting to see whether the Western Powers would back their formal declaration of war with effective force, Germany should seize the initiative and make an all-out attack on the French and the British, thereby removing once and for all the limitations on Germany's freedom of action.

The German generals saw clearly what this meant: far from being content with, and trying to exploit the good luck which had enabled him to avoid a clash with the Western Powers so far, Hitler was deliberately setting out to turn the localized campaign he had won in Poland into a general war. Their doubts did not deter him for a moment and, although they managed on one pretext or another to delay operations, in May 1940 it was the German Army, without waiting for the French or the British, which launched the attack in the West and turned the *drôle de guerre* into a major war.

Even this is not the end of the story. Once again, Hitler proved to be a better judge than the experts. In the middle of events, his nerve faltered, he became hysterical, blamed everyone, behaved in short in exactly the opposite way to the copy-book picture of the man of destiny: but when the battle was over he had inflicted a greater and swifter defeat upon France than any in history. And it is no good saying that it was 'the machine' that did this, not Hitler. Hitler was never the prisoner of 'the machine'. If 'the machine' had been left to decide things, it would never have taken the risk of attacking in the West, and,

if it had, would never have adopted the Ardennes plan which was the key to victory. Pushing the argument further back, one can add that, if it had been left to 'the machine', German rearmament would never have been carried out at the pace on which Hitler insisted, or on the blitzkrieg pattern which proved to be as applicable to war with the Western Powers as to the limited Polish campaign.

Once again, the obvious question presents itself: what would have happened if Hitler, now as much master of continental Europe as Napoleon had been, had halted at this point, turned to organizing a continental New Order in Europe, and left to the British the decision whether to accept the situation—if not in 1940, then perhaps in 1941—or to continue a war in which they had as yet neither American nor Russian allies, were highly vulnerable to attack, and could never hope by themselves to overcome the disparity between their own and Hitler's continental resources. Once again—this is my point—it was thanks to Hitler, and no one else that this question was never posed. It was Hitler who decided that enough was not enough, that the war must go on—Hitler, not the German military leaders or the German people, many of whom would have been content to stop at this point, enjoy the fruits of victory, and risk nothing more.

If the war had to continue, then the obvious course was to concentrate all Germany's—and Europe's—resources on the one opponent left, Britain. If invasion was too difficult and dangerous an operation, there were other means—a Mediterranean campaign with something more than the limited forces reluctantly made available to Rommel, or intensification of the air and submarine war, as Raeder urged. The one thing no one thought of except Hitler was to attack Russia, a country whose government had shown itself painfully anxious to avoid conflict and give every economic assistance to Germany. There was nothing improvised about Hitler's attack on Russia. Of all his decisions it was the one taken furthest in advance and most carefully prepared for, the one over which he hesitated least and which he approached with so much confidence that he even risked a five-week delay in starting in order to punish the Yugoslavs and settle the Balkans.¹

Nor was it conceived of solely as a military operation. The plans were ready to extend to the newly captured territory the

¹ See G. L. Weinberg, *Germany and the Soviet Union 1939-41* (The Hague, 1954).

monstrous programme of uprooting whole populations which the S.S.—including Eichmann—had already put into effect in Poland.¹ Finally, of all Hitler's decisions it is the one which most clearly bears his own personal stamp, the culmination (as he saw it) of his whole career.

XI

It will now be evident why I have carried my account beyond the conventional date of September 1939. Between that date and June 1941, the scope of the war was steadily enlarged from the original limited Polish campaign to a conflict which, with the attack on Russia, was now on as great a scale as the war of 1914–18. The initiative at each stage—except in the Balkans where he was reluctant to become involved—had been Hitler's. Of course he could not have done this without the military machine and skill in using it which the German armed forces put at his disposal, but the evidence leaves no doubt that the decision where and when to use that machine was in every case Hitler's, not his staff's, still less that all Hitler was doing was to react to the initiative of his opponents.

Now, it may be that the Hitler who took these increasingly bold decisions after September 1939 was a different person from the Hitler who conducted German foreign policy before that date, but this is surely implausible. It seems to me far more likely that the pattern which is unmistakable after September 1939, using each victory as the basis for raising the stakes in a still bolder gamble next time, is the correct interpretation of his conduct of foreign policy before that date. And this interpretation is reinforced by the fact that at the same time Hitler was carrying out the rearmament and expansion of the German armed forces on a pattern which exactly corresponds to the kind of war which he proceeded to wage after September 1939.

Let me repeat and underline what I said earlier in this lecture: this has nothing to do with time-tables and blueprints of aggression. Throughout his career Hitler was an opportunist, prepared to seize on and exploit any opportunity that was offered to him. There was nothing inevitable about the way or the order in which events developed, either before or after September 1939. The annexation of Austria and the attempt

¹ See Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV, German Resettlement and Population Policy 1939–45* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), and Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941–45* (London, 1957).

to eliminate Czechoslovakia, by one means or another, were predictable, but after the occupation of Prague, there were other possibilities which might have produced a quite different sequence of events—as there were after the fall of France. Of what wars or other major events in history is this not true?

But Hitler's opportunism was doubly effective because it was allied with unusual consistency of purpose. This found expression in three things:

First, in his aims—to restore German military power, expand her frontiers, gather together the scattered populations of Volksdeutsche, and found a new German empire in Eastern Europe, the inhabitants of which would either be driven out, exterminated, or retained as slave-labour.

Second, in the firmness with which he grasped from the beginning what such aims entailed—the conquest of power in Germany on terms that would leave him with a free hand, the risk of pre-emptive intervention by other Powers, the need to shape German rearmament in such a way as to enable him to win a quick advantage within a limited time by surprise and concentration of force, the certainty that to carry out his programme would mean war.

Third, in the strength of will which underlay all his hesitations, opportunism, and temperamental outbursts, and in his readiness to take risks and constantly to increase these by raising the stakes—from the reoccupation of the Rhineland to the invasion of Russia (with Britain still undefeated in his rear) within the space of no more than five years.

Given such an attitude on the part of a man who controlled one of the most powerful nations in the world, the majority of whose people were prepared to believe what he told them about their racial superiority and to greet his satisfaction of their nationalist ambitions with enthusiasm—given this, I cannot see how a clash between Germany and the other Powers could have been avoided. Except on the assumption that Britain and France were prepared to disinterest themselves in what happened east of the Rhine and accept the risk of seeing him create a German hegemony over the rest of Europe. There was nothing inevitable about either the date or the issue on which the clash actually came. It half came over Czechoslovakia in 1938; it might have come over another issue than Poland. But I cannot see how it could have been avoided some time, somewhere, unless the other Powers were prepared to stand by and watch

Hitler pursue his tactics of one-at-a-time to the point where they would no longer have the power to stop him.

If the Western Powers had recognized the threat earlier and shown greater resolution in resisting Hitler's (and Mussolini's) demands, it is possible that the clash might not have led to war, or at any rate not to a war on the scale on which it had finally to be fought. The longer they hesitated, the higher the price of resistance. This is their share of the responsibility for the war: that they were reluctant to recognize what was happening, reluctant to give a lead in opposing it, reluctant to act in time. Hitler understood their state of mind perfectly and played on it with skill. None of the Great Powers comes well out of the history of the 1930s, but this sort of responsibility even when it runs to appeasement, as in the case of Britain and France, or complicity as in the case of Russia, is still recognizably different from that of a government which deliberately creates the threat of war and sets out to exploit it.

In the Europe of the 1930s there were several leaders—Mussolini, for instance—who would have liked to follow such a policy, but lacked the toughness of will and the means to carry it through. Hitler alone possessed the will and had provided himself with the means. Not only did he create the threat of war and exploit it, but when it came to the point he was prepared to take the risk and go to war and, then when he had won the Polish campaign, to redouble the stakes and attack again, first in the West, then in the East. For this reason, despite all that we have learned since of the irresolution, shabbiness, and chicanery of other governments' policies, Hitler and the nation which followed him still bear, not the sole, but the primary responsibility for the war which began in 1939 and which, before Hitler was prepared to admit defeat, cost the lives of more than 25 million human beings in Europe alone.