THE EUROPEAN HISTORY SERIES

THE ORIGINS OF WORLD WAR II

THIRD EDITION

KEITH EUBANK

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FOR DAVID AND ELLEN

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PREFACE

TO THE THIRD EDITION

Since the original writing of this book, new publications on the origins of World War II have made the study of this topic more complex. There still remains no simple answer to the question: "Why World War II?" Nevertheless, if we are to search for answers, it is necessary to examine the policies, the outlook, and the experience of the statesmen and politicians who wrestled with Adolf Hitler's demands, as well as the military, political and economic conditions of their nations. In addition, Hitler's responsibility for World War II has mounted as new evidence indicates that he craved the war he got in 1939 but failed to get in 1938. It is important also to study the policies of those who had to confront Hitler but did not understand his intentions and policies until it was too late. They preferred peace to another bloody conflict.

The aim of this book is to explain the origins of the world war that began in 1939 and ended in 1945 with 30,000,000 people dead and unbelievable devastation over much of the world. This book seeks answers to these questions. Why, after the ordeal of 1914–1918, did Western powers err in assessing the threat that loomed across the Rhine? Why was there so much reluctance on the part of Britain and France to confront the once defeated foe? Why had Germany been permitted to rearm? Why should Germany be allowed to occupy independent nations without a struggle?

Part of the answer, as I argue in these pages, can be attributed to the illusion that sufficient security measures were in place to maintain peace. The memories of the terrible destruction and loss of life during the years 1914–1918 seemed to make another world war unthinkable. But this illusion misled men and women

into imagining that they were safe from another world conflict until they faced the necessity of choosing between surrender to an aggressor's demands or going to war again.

A major theme in this book is the role of appeasers in dealing with Hitler and in trying to avoid war. What was the purpose of a policy of appeasement? Why did the appeasers fail to perceive Hitler's intentions? Why were appeasers so reluctant to confront Hitler? Was there actually a purpose in appeasement? I have tried to show that appeasement was a policy with a history that had public approval. In analyzing appeasement, it is also necessary to examine the role of the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, who was not as foolish as some have imagined. As it turns out, Chamberlain does have his defenders. The Western democracies have been denounced for their failure to go to war against Germany before 1939. Such accusations fail to take into account the public mood and the lack of military preparedness on the part of France and Great Britain. It is important to realize that the Western leaders who had to make the decision for war or peace had grave doubts about the capabilities of their armed forces.

The myths that have emerged from the history of this era still flourish. They include the notion that Britain and France could have halted the German reoccupation of the Rhineland with ease had they only tried; that appeasement of Hitler was tantamount to cowardice on the part of Neville Chamberlain; and the fiction of Stalin's eagerness to save the world from Hitler.

I have sought to reassess Soviet policies in the light of more recent research which shows that they were never as altruistic as some have imagined. Some historians have condemned the French and British for failing to conclude an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1939; indeed, one can blame them for their shortsightedness in dealing with Stalin. At the same time, Moscow cannot be acquitted for its duplicity and opportunism in allowing Hitler to unleash his war which ultimately brought death and destruction to the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War, American politicians were influenced by the failure to confront Hitler in the years before 1939. Consequently alliances were created, plans developed and American troops stationed in Europe to prevent Soviet aggression.

When a crisis erupted over Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962, sufficient American military forces were mobilized to force a resolution of the crisis. The United States government did not intend to pursue a policy of appeasement.

My intention in writing this book has been to present a concise explanation of the origins of this war in the light of recent research. I have tried to update this book and to provide new details about the events of this significant period of history. I hope that the bibliographical essay will aid readers in learning more about this subject.

These pages have profited from discussions with my students and colleagues when I was teaching at Queens Collage and at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I am grateful to the staff of the Benjamin Rosenthal Library of Queens College for seeking out-of-print books. More recently I am indebted to the staff of the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia for their kind and efficient aid. As always, I must take full responsibility for whatever errors and shortcomings are found in these pages.

Keith Eubank
Charlottesville, Virginia

1 / "PEACE," 1918–1933

NOVEMBER 11, 1918

When the slaughter across Europe ceased after 11:00 A.M. on November 11, 1918, and peace returned to the world, the extent of the devastation that lay about the exhausted armies was new to human history. After four years of war, the piles of stones, the battered chimneys, and the roofless houses were the only signs that people had once lived in peaceful towns and villages. The trenches where soldiers had burrowed, lived, fought, and died for a few yards of mud were mute evidence of the way of life that had destroyed the quiet countryside. The life and culture that were over had been Europe's greatest era. All that was left on the continent were the remnants of the four empires destroyed by the conflict. Over ten million people lay dead, and millions more had been wounded—but the cost in heartache and sorrow could not really be reckoned. What had begun with the murder of an Austrian archduke ended with millions of soldiers from many nations fighting across continents and oceans.

But the big losers were the countries of Europe. For Germany, the war had been a struggle for domination of world economy and trade, though the German leaders had led the German people to believe they were battling for survival against encirclement by Britain, Russia, and France. The vision of a German-dominated Europe that the German nationalists had grasped for vanished suddenly in the fall of 1918—but only after they had occupied Belgium, overrun northern France, and defeated Russia.

The German government sought peace then only because it feared utter destruction and because its leaders wished to save the army and keep the nation intact. Further fighting, they reasoned, could destroy the Fatherland without bringing victory

nearer. An armistice, on the other hand, could save Germany, giving the nation time to recuperate until it was better prepared to renew the war. The German civilians, however, were not prepared for the armistice. The High Command had not informed the nation of the plight of the armies, and the German countryside was almost completely untouched by war. Only a few villages in Alsace had been lost to the enemy—how, then, could the German people reconcile defeat? They had passed through three victorious wars of unification; and in this great war, they heard nothing but optimism from the front. Defeat was unheard of, and it would not be accepted.

The Entente powers were jubilant. The dancing, cheering throngs in Piccadilly and Times Square were delirious because their great efforts were over. The rejoicing was not so delirious in Paris because too many French families were in mourning for loved ones; to the French as well as to the other victorious nations, the possibility of another world war was unthinkable. One Austrian archduke had not been worth so many dead. World war must never come again; everything must be done to avoid it.

However, twenty-one years after, the unthinkable was to happen. This second world war of the twentieth century was never really inevitable: decisions, plans, mistakes, stupidities, fears, and all the unplanned and unexpected events in human life combined to bring it about. These events have their origins in the armistice that saved German unity and the German army, prevented Allied occupation, and thus left the German people unresigned to the collapse of their dreams. The terms of the armistice were drawn deliberately to ensure that Germany would be unable to renew the war. They required that German troops be withdrawn beyond the Rhine River while the Allied troops established bridgeheads on the right bank. Quantities of war materials and all of the submarine fleet were to be surrendered; sixteen capital ships were to be interned. Although Germany was to be unoccupied, the blockade would be continued.

Military occupation would have brought home to every German town the reality of defeat. But, saved by the armistice, the German army retired intact within the frontiers. Army units were welcomed back to their homeland with parades and cheering throngs, as though they were the victors instead of the van-

quished. Because the army had not been routed and because German cities had escaped damage, army leaders were able to invent the myth of a "stab in the back"—the army had not been defeated on the battlefield but had been betrayed at home.

Under pressure from those in his government who wished to escape an onerous peace, Kaiser Wilhelm II had been forced to abdicate on November 9, 1918, in favor of a parliamentary monarchy. That same day, because of the outbreak of civil war and the fear of a Bolshevik-style uprising, the Social Democrat leader Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed a democratic republic. In one afternoon, Germany had adopted a form of government for which it was unprepared. Born in defeat, and shame, the Republic would be unable to avoid the stigma of the armistice, the "stab in the back," and the Treaty of Versailles, while the military leaders and the monarchy would be able to escape responsibility. The Weimar Republic—named for the city where its constitution was drafted—needed the loyalty of every German to survive, but never would all of the citizens back the strange new government with any enthusiasm. Too many people in high places were longing for the monarchy; and too many others were busy undermining the new government, even at its inception.

THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

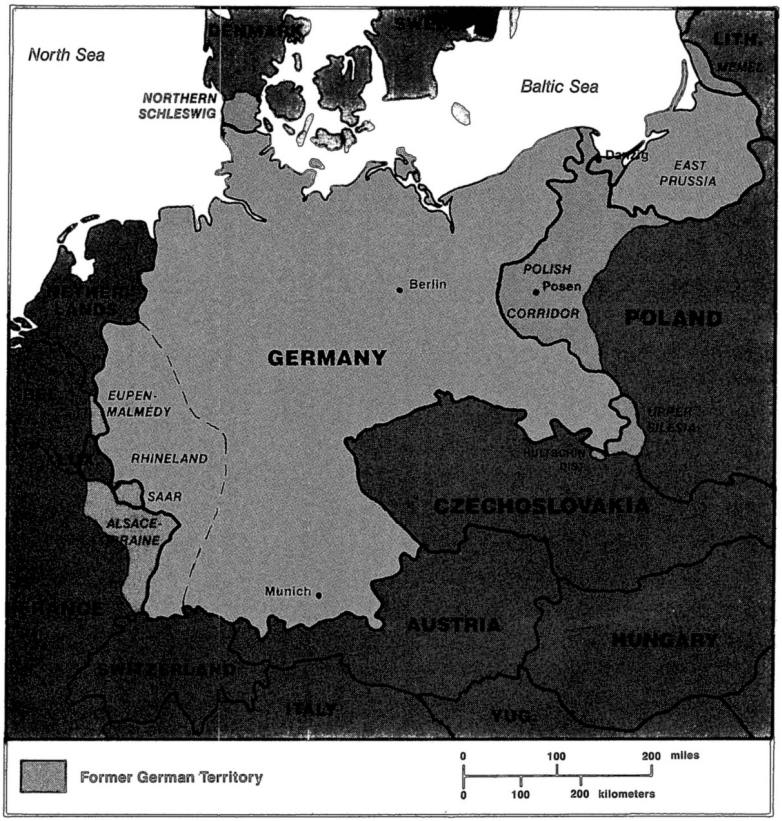
The delegates from twenty-seven nations assembling in Paris in January 1919 faced a host of problems. The Peace Conference's foremost concern was to prevent German domination of Europe. There were other problems as well—many of them created by dissension among the victors themselves. Because of the enormous cost of the conflict, many were insisting that Germany pay the total cost of the war. New states had appeared, snarling over boundaries and populations; these had to be sorted out in some logical and equitable fashion. Italy was intent upon looting the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Britain, Japan, and France insisted on dividing the German colonies among themselves. In the midst of all this, a scheme had to be devised to ensure peace in the future.

The Council of Four—Woodrow Wilson of the United States, Georges Clemenceau of France, David Lloyd George of Great

Britain, and Vittorio Orlando of Italy—dominated the Peace Conference. This quartet faced an enormous task—writing a peace treaty for Germany, working on treaties for the other defeated powers, restoring peace among the smaller European states, feeding the starving, establishing the League of Nations, and all the while continuing to govern their own nations. Not only did they lack the ability and temperament to accomplish their task, but each was so occupied with his own concerns that he failed to see the importance of the whole or the vital interests of the others. Wilson was chiefly interested in the League of Nations, insisting on inserting it in the treaty dealing with Germany. Orlando sought plunder for Italy, halting the conference with his demands, but Wilson forced his departure so they could get on with treaty writing. Lloyd George was concerned with insuring British naval supremacy, enlarging the empire, and reviving trade. Clemenceau was bent upon protecting France, which had been twice invaded by German armies in his lifetime.

The Treaty of Versailles was finally drafted by Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau, with limited help from the host of experts they had brought to Paris. Since 1919, the Treaty of Versailles has been severely criticized; but critics of the treaty have damned Clemenceau as the villain with Lloyd George as his accomplice, and have lauded Wilson as the White Knight who wanted to remake the world but who was thwarted by selfish European politicians. Actually, Wilson was more easily satisfied by the treaty than was Clemenceau, who, forced into compromises, warned his colleagues of the faults in the restrictions that they had placed—or had failed to place—on German might. It is true that Lloyd George achieved his aims in the treaty, but he alone attempted to improve it before Wilson left Paris. It was Wilson who was so in favor of the treaty as it was, consenting only to minor changes, as long as he had his League of Nations.

In May 1919, the treaty terms were presented to the German delegation, which was allowed to reply in writing but not to negotiate. Living in their dream world, unconscious of the hatred accumulated during the war, the delegation was shocked by the terms presented to them. But the Weimar government had little choice other than to accept the terms. A renewal of the war, the German generals advised, could bring an end to both the Ger-



German Territorial Losses in Central Europe, 1919

man army and German unity. In the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919, the German delegation signed the Treaty of Versailles—but it is now evident that the German nation never intended to abide by it.

The terms of the treaty tract been designed to render Germany helpless forever. The army was limited to 100,000 officers and soldiers serving a twelve-year term of enlistment; military conscription was forbidden; the General Staff was dissolved; military schools were restricted, the manufacture of arms and munitions was curtailed, and the export and import of them were forbidden; the navy was reduced and the air force outlawed. An Allied military control commission would supervise disarmament.

Germany was stripped of its colonies and was forced to cede territory to Denmark, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. To give Poland an outlet to the Baltic Sea, East Prussia was detached by a strip of land that became known as the Polish Corridor, an area that included Danzig, which would be a free city under League of Nations administration. Not only would the Rhineland be occupied by Allied troops for fifteen years to ensure compliance with the terms of the treaty, but it would be permanently demilitarized—no German troops, no military weapons, no fortifications. The Saar area would be under the League of Nations for fifteen years after which a plebiscite would decide the final control.

The treaty also required that Germany pay for reparations, but because the Council of Four would not agree on the amount of reparations, it had to be determined after the peace conference by a special commission. To German patriots this seemed to be a "blank check" designed to ruin Germany forever; they were unwilling to conceive of any method whereby Germany would be able to pay reparations. Moreover, Germany did not want to pay reparations and was determined not to pay them.

Article 231, erroneously labeled "the war guilt clause," which introduced the reparations section of the Treaty of Versailles, and provided the legal basis for the reparations, was incomprehensible to the German population who had been told by the Imperial government that Germany had fought a defensive war. According to this clause, Germany accepted "the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies." The German people did not realize that this clause was also included in the peace treaties with Austria and Hungary; it never mentioned "war guilt." Allied leaders never imagined that Article 231 would be interpreted as a war guilt clause. The Allied leaders had never thought about writing such a clause. Moreover, the Allied leaders assumed that the Germans realized that they had lost the war and were responsible for the outbreak of the war. Nevertheless, the Weimar Republic assigned the task of refuting war guilt to a special office set up in the foreign ministry. This office subsidized books—suppressing some—

and hired journalists and historians to convince the world of German's innocence. Germany's resentment of the treaty of Versailles would help Adolf Hitler's rise to power.

Unemployed army officers, university professors, civil servants, and even clergymen swelled the chorus damning the treaty and the new republic that had accepted it. Rather conveniently they forgot that a precedent had been set for this kind of "war guilt" in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, March 3, 1918, when the Imperial German government had detached over one million square miles of Russian land (a deed remembered by Wilson). They ignored the heavy indemnity and the cession of Alsace-Lorraine that Bismarck had demanded of France in 1871. Most important, they failed to consider that, had Germany won in 1918, the defeated Allies would have paid heavier reparations and suffered a greater loss of land.

With the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies imagined they had found a means for preventing German domination of Europe; but the treaty was deceptive—its strength was an illusion. It was not harsh enough to render Germany impotent forever, but it was severe enough to provide German nationalists with a cause they could use to rally the nation against the treaty. British and American delegations had not hesitated to impose heavy obligations on Germany, but neither was willing to insist on a means to compel fulfillment of the terms. Both condemned French efforts to ensure German compliance. The French wanted the Treaty of Versailles to be a safeguard against future German aggression; but Wilson and Lloyd George assumed that Germany would willingly enforce the provisions, acting as its own policeman. Thanks to the Anglo-American objections, only the Rhineland would be occupied, and it was to be evacuated within fifteen years, providing Germany had fulfilled the Treaty of Versailles. Penalties for German violation of treaty terms were nonexistent. When the occupation of the Rhineland ended in 1930 ahead of schedule, and Allied troops withdrew, nothing remained within Germany to guarantee German observance of the treaty terms.

This is not to say that the Allies completely ignored the problem of policing German disarmament. It is simply that their policing never became effective. Except for the army of occupation in the Rhineland, Germany was unoccupied. However,

the treaty set up the Allied Control Commission to insure German compliance, but its unarmed control officers encountered a well-organized attempt to frustrate their efforts. Using passive resistance, insults, and physical intimidation, the German army systematically blocked the Commission. In 1927, at German insistence, the Allied Control Commission was withdrawn, and its final report on German violations of the disarmament provisions of the Treaty of Versailles was ignored and suppressed.

The great industrial empire of Krupp diversified its operations, setting up satellite armament production centers in Sweden and in the Netherlands producing artillery, antiaircraft guns, and tanks. Tony Fokker, owner of the Fokker Aircraft Works, smuggled planes, parts, and equipment in trainloads to the Netherlands and soon began producing and selling planes.

The Reparations Commission set up by the treaty finally presented a bill to Germany and her former allies for $33,000,000,000 in gold. France needed reparations to pay its heavy reconstruction costs and the debts owed to Britain and the United States. Britain refused cancellation of debts owed by France unless the United States was willing to cancel British debts. But the United States was unwilling to cancel any debts whatsoever. In the words of President Calvin Coolidge, "They hired the money, didn't they?"

It is evident now that Germany never intended to pay reparations. The Weimar government requested a scaling down of payment and a new assessment of German ability to pay. The French rejected this flatly, arguing that, if neither London nor Washington considered French ability to pay, the yardstick should not be applied to Germany. An international conference to work out a new settlement might have been able to solve the muddle, but the United States refused to negotiate out of fear that the French and British might succeed in lowering their war debts. But the blame cannot be placed fully upon the United States nor upon the Allies in general. Certainly their failure to come to an agreement on reduction of reparations left Germany faced with the necessity of paying the full amount, but Germany was not so much weakened economically by the reparations as angered by them. What Germany ultimately paid in reparations proved to be far less than the total assessment.