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John Keegan

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THE BATTLE FOR HISTORY

Re-Fighting World War Two

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Hutchinson

London

Epub ISBN: 9781446406403
Version 1.0
www.randomhouse.co.uk

This edition first published in 1995 by
Hutchinson

Random House (UK) Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Ltd
PO Box 337, Bergvlei, 2012 South Africa

A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 0 09 179229 0

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Chapter One: Controversy and the Second World War

"It was a wonderful war," wrote A.J.P. Taylor. What war can ever be wonderful, least of all one that killed fifty million people, destroyed swathes of Europe's cultural heritage, devastated its economy, depraved its politics, devalued the very moral basis of its civilization? That, nevertheless, was Taylor's written verdict on the war. He was prepared to repeat his opinion in speech. "What did you feel about the war while it was going on?" I once asked the great historian. "Wonderful," he said. "Wonderful."

Taylor was a notorious controversialist. He hated Hitler, but refused to visit the United States, though its capitalism, which he loathed, fueled the arsenal of democracy that brought the dictator down. He was a democrat and an English nationalist but believed that his country's best interests would be served by a Soviet rather than an American Alliance, though the United States was the beacon of democracy and the Soviet Union the enemy of democracy at home and abroad. He feared Germany, wished to sustain its post-war division, yet argued that Hitler had stumbled into war in 1939 by miscalculation, not by design. He was always ready to make the strongest moral judgments about men and events but saw history as a chapter of accidents. He was a great historian; however, as such, his chief achievement was to represent the history of the Second World War not as a chronicle of the triumph of good over evil but as a jousting-ground for scholarly dispute. When his now notorious book *The Origins of the Second World War*[1] aroused an almost unanimous denunciation by his peers, he

modified his views not at all, reissued it, and added an introduction which reinforced his original argument.

What are the great controversies that surround the war? Some concern its origins, some its conduct, some its personalities, some its mysteries, some its byroads so remote from its central thrust that only specialists regard them as controversial at all. Some controversies are entirely bogus, like David Irving's contention that Hitler's subordinates kept from him the facts of the Final Solution, the extermination of the Jews, or James Bacque's crackpot assertion that Eisenhower was responsible for the deaths of a million prisoners of war once the war was over. Irving continues to offer a monetary award to anyone who can produce a document authorizing the Final Solution to which Hitler's signature is appended. Bacque, since the publication of the papers of a scholarly conference exploding for good and all the substance of his delusion, has sensibly kept silent.

There may never be a decisive rejoinder to the Taylor thesis that the war came about by accident. His argument, essentially, is that Hitler had won so much advantage by playing on the weakness, irresolution, and disunity of his opponents — over rearmament, the reoccupation of the Rhineland, the annexation of Austria, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia — that he blinded himself in August 1939 to the possibility of their having a sticking-point. In a progression of diplomatic triumphs, culminating in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which aborted the chance of squeezing Germany between the military power of Britain, France, and Russia, Hitler may well have seen his aggression against Poland as something that London and Paris would swallow also. To argue otherwise is to claim powers of mind-reading not normally given to humans, let alone historians. We simply do not know how Hitler counted the cards in his hand. We do, however, know what sort of game he was playing. *Mein Kampf* is a significant book;

Hitler's speeches to the German people before and after the "seizure of power" are significant also, in the way that the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Fichte's *Speeches to the German Nation* is significant. That famous appeal called the Germans to nationhood before there was ever a German state. Hitler's speeches called the Germans to a new nationhood after the humiliation of defeat, occupation, and what was intended to be permanent disarmament. For Hitler, the First World War had been "the supreme experience." The defeat of his country devalued the contribution his generation had made, and the sacrifice their parents had made in offering their offspring to the holocaust of the trenches, and so demanded that the outcome be put to a second test. "Revenge" does not quite summarize Hitler's emotions over the war, though revenge was a powerful ingredient; "readjudication" better describes what he wanted, even at the cost of more German deaths — to the deaths of non-Germans he was, of course, perfectly indifferent. He was determined that Germany should have a victory to expunge Versailles, thought he could get it by browbeating and outwitting those who had dictated the Versailles terms, and persisted in that course as far as invading, on September 1, 1939, the former German territory which Versailles had transferred to the despised Polish state. He expected Poland to fight, on that no one disagrees. What Taylor argues is that Hitler did not expect Britain and France to make good their guarantees to Poland. What almost everyone says is that Hitler did not care.

We are dealing with states of mind. Taylor's opponents hold that Hitler's state of mind — violent, vindictive, vengeful — drove German policy to a preordained war in September 1939. Taylor went to his grave insisting that states of mind are irrelevant in dissecting historical causes. Since state of mind defined everything Taylor did and wrote, which is what made him the pyrotechnician he was, his