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Why The Allies Won

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WHY THE ALLIES WON

RICHARD OVERY

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Preface to the Second Edition

IT IS NOW almost twelve years since the first edition of *Why the Allies Won* was written. In the interval a great deal of additional material has been published and new perspectives opened up on the history of the Second World War. Some touch on the questions raised here, but others have opened up fresh avenues of approach to the issue of war as a cultural or social phenomenon rather than on the issues of war-making and strategic choice with which explanations of victory and defeat are bound up. In most respects the arguments about this narrower question of Allied victory stand or fall today in much the same way as they did a decade ago. As a result it has not seemed necessary to write a different book, but instead primarily to take the opportunity to correct mistakes and make clearer what was not clear in the earlier version.

There is one area, however, where the historiography and the base of evidence are changing very rapidly. The history of the Soviet war effort has been the beneficiary of a decade of close research, which has not altered the basic shape of the narrative but has deepened understanding about the big issues raised and modified or overturned versions of events that seemed standard in 1995. The major question – how did the Red Army succeed in holding back and then defeating the overwhelming bulk of the German armed forces – now has fuller answers than it once had. The research on detailed aspects of the reform of Soviet military practice and thinking during the war has shown conclusively that mere numbers did not suffice to explain the difference between the two sides. The sheer depth of

Soviet preparation for war, for all its drawbacks and miscalculations, has been shown to be more wide-ranging and significant than was once thought, thanks to the work of Lennard Samuelson and David Glantz. For all the catastrophic losses of 1941, the Soviet Union was never starting from ground zero in its attempts to rebuild its armed and economic strength in 1942 and 1943. The vexed question of Lend-Lease, about which a generation of Soviet scholars were so deprecating, has now been transformed by the evidence that the Soviet leadership understood very well how vital these resources were in a context where their rump economy could not produce both armaments and the raw materials and equipment necessary to sustain the war effort. Finally the whole idea that the Soviet side sought an armistice or separate peace in 1941 and again in 1943 has been shown to be without the serious foundation attributed to it a decade ago.

On the wider arguments about the reasons behind Allied victory there will always be disagreement. *Why the Allies Won* did not differ from much of the literature of the early 1990s in emphasising just how important the Soviet contribution was. Perhaps in reaction to the predominantly Soviet-centred analysis of the outcome, there has been a drift back to a more balanced view. The impact of bombing, for example, though the subject of increasing moral condemnation has come to be regarded as more significant in limiting German (and Italian and Japanese) options than was once thought. It is worthwhile here to make clear, since it has been a subject of some confusion in the arguments surrounding the book, that explaining the role of bombing in the defeat of Germany is not the same as endorsing the legitimacy of the campaign. There were pressing military and political reasons which explain the British and American choice, but the consequent death, disablement and dispossession of millions of civilians, was not in any sense consistent with the liberal values of the

two states that embarked on the campaign or with their pre-conflict view of what was and what was not permissible in international law. Mass civilian deaths are not something of which anyone could approve or feel morally indifferent towards; but it is necessary in this context to understand the nature of the impact that such bombardment produced.

There were two areas in the book where I displayed a woeful failure to grasp the technical and scientific complexity of what I was describing. The first was in the naval war, the second in the development of nuclear weapons and technology. I am very grateful for the advice I received on both areas, on whose basis I have made the necessary changes. The details tend to strengthen rather than weaken the overall thrust of the argument, but the details are important, particularly as so much of the discussion hinges on small but significant improvements in tactics and weaponry, which still tend to be underestimated in analysis of military conflict.

I was fortunate that *Why the Allies Won* was chosen as the theme for the annual conference of the German Committee for the History of the Second World War when it met in Hamburg in 2002. The conference was an interesting reflection of the two very differing approaches to the history of the war still current among those interested in its outcome as a historical problem. The idea that this was a war that Hitler lost rather than one that the Allies won has remained embedded in much of the analysis of the conflict. The chief justification for writing this book in the first place was to challenge the assumption that the outcome was determined by the nature of the strategic gamble and persistent errors, political and otherwise, attributed to Axis leaders. That is still a pertinent ambition, all the more so since with the passage of time the nature of the stakes between the two sides has become clearer and more fantastic. The (often deluded) assumption that world history had reached a dead end in the years after the end of

the First World War produced a growing popular sense of civilisation in crisis for which a new civilisation or a new order were deemed to be the only remedies. The bitter divide between the Allies and Axis can better be understood in the context of the collective anxieties and paranoia that fuelled an age of political extremes, encouraged desperate and vicious recipes for survival and resulted in Europe's and Asia's descent into a decade of barbarism and atrocity. An Axis victory would have brought radical change dressed up as the triumph of a new version of modernity. The intensity of the efforts to prevent that happening, which mobilised populations otherwise unaware of or indifferent to the world-historical forces they confronted, explains why this war became a war to the death – and why it took the lives of more than sixty million worldwide. While it is possible to explain (and argue about) how one side prevailed over the other, there lurks a still larger question about why the developed world in the inter-war years, having experienced and been horrified by the Great War, should descend in twenty years into a crisis more deadly and damaging than the first and in a milieu of political oppression, civil conflict and ideological hatred without precedent in the modern age. In a century's time this may well seem a more significant question than the narrower, if important, issue with which this book began.

I would finally like to acknowledge the helpful advice I have had from the following: Corelli Barnett, M.G. Brewer, George Bornet, Reg Curtis, Joseph Forbes, Evan Mawdsley, Henry Ploeestra, E.A. Rawes, Lt. Comm. David Waters and Alfred Weber. I am also grateful to Will Sulkin for giving me the opportunity to update and overhaul the first edition.

Richard Overy
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May 2006

Preface

WHEN PEOPLE HEARD that the title of my next book was to be 'Why the Allies Won', it often provoked the retort: 'Did they?' There are many ways of winning. With the passage of time it has become possible to argue that none of the three major Allies – Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union – won a great deal. Britain lost her empire and her leading world role; the United States found that they had traded one European enemy for another, an 'evil empire' apparently more dangerous and unfathomable than Hitler's; as for the Soviet Union, the cost of sustaining the super-power status won in 1945 eventually produced a crisis in Soviet society which led to its collapse in 1991. The three Axis states – Germany, Italy and Japan – have made no attempt to become major military powers again, but they have all produced economic success stories instead. Germany and Japan became the superpowers of the world market, and their citizens a good deal richer than the British, whose war effort almost bankrupted what had been one of the wealthiest economies in the world in 1939. When people ask 'Did they?', these are the things they have in mind.

The Allies unquestionably won the military contest in 1945, and it is with victory in this narrower sense that this book is concerned. I have not tried to provide a general history of the war – there are plenty of those already. The focus of the book is to explain the outcome, rather than to describe its course. I have restricted the narrative to those parts of the conflict I regard as decisive, first the areas of combat, then the other elements of the war – production,

technology, politics, and morale. As a result, many familiar aspects of the story are dealt with only briefly. The eastern front has been given a prominence it surely deserves, but the battles in the Pacific and the war between Japan and China here must take a back seat. It is fashionable to see the use of intelligence as a critical difference between the two sides, but I am not sufficiently persuaded of this to give the subject a chapter of its own. Where intelligence clearly had special significance, its story has been woven into the narrative. All of this has been done in order to answer very directly the question of 'why the Allies won'.

There are conventional answers to this question. There is a commonly-held assumption that the Axis states were beaten by sheer weight of material strength, which ought inevitably to prevail in an age of industrialised warfare. To this might be added a related assumption, that Germany, Japan and Italy made fundamental mistakes in the war, not the least of which was biting off more than they could chew in fighting Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union together. Neither of these assumptions is very satisfactory, and it would be wrong to pretend that what follows is not in some sense a response to them. The more I have worked on the history of the Second World War, the more I have become convinced that the outcome had not just a material explanation but also important moral and political causes. I am also sceptical of the view that the Axis powers lost the war through their own efforts rather than those of the Allies. Mistakes were obviously made on both sides, but the outcome on the battlefield ultimately depended on a very great improvement in the military effectiveness of Allied forces. The Allies did not have victory handed to them on a plate; they had to fight for it.

This might seem an obvious point to those who lived through the war, but it is one that is seldom made with much force. I owe a debt to all those veterans of the conflict I have talked with and listened to over the years.

Their testimony has prompted me to think more critically about Allied success. I have accumulated many other debts along the way too numerous to mention. I would like to give particular thanks to Ken Follett who has read more of the manuscript than anyone else; also to Andrew Heritage for help with the maps; and to Geoffrey Roberts, Peter Gatrell and Mark Harrison for help on aspects of the Soviet war effort. I also owe a great deal to my publisher, Neil Belton, and to my editor Liz Smith, both of whom have helped enormously to make this a much better product than I could have made it. My agent, Gill Coleridge, has been more patient than I deserve.

Richard Overy
March 1995

Author's Note

THROUGHOUT THE TEXT the terms 'Allies' and 'Axis' have been used. These terms need to be qualified. The 'Allies' covers a set of shifting coalitions: Britain, France and Poland from 1939 to 1940, Britain and the Soviet Union in 1941, and Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and a host of other smaller states from 1942; from 1944, with the fall of the French Vichy regime, France again became one of the major Allied powers. Both the terms 'Britain' and 'France' have to be understood also to cover their respective empires. In the British case this included the Dominion states Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, all of which made very substantial contributions to the Allied war effort. Neither the Allied nor Axis powers were united as a whole in a formal military or political alliance. Only Britain and the Soviet Union had a firm alliance, sealed in 1942. The Axis states were united only by informal agreements. Italy broke with the Axis in 1943, though Italians continued to fight for both sides. I have persisted in using the conventional shorthand fully aware of its lack of historical precision. The alternatives are simply too cumbersome to sustain readability, but the defects of the existing terms must be borne in mind.

Measurements provide difficulties too. I have in general kept to imperial weights and distances, i.e. pounds, tons and miles. But in cases where the metric system is commonly used (for example in expressing certain gun calibres and wavelengths) I have kept the metric measurement. The use of tons needs to be clarified. I have used the word interchangeably for imperial, American and

metric tons. In general tons applied to Soviet or German production are metric tonnes, 2,204 pounds instead of the imperial 2,240 pounds. In America the ton is generally 2,000 pounds. Measures of Japanese and American oil production have generally been quoted in barrels: approximately 7.5 barrels equal 1 ton of oil. Again, it proved too cumbersome to make all these differences explicit throughout the text.

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UNPREDICTABLE VICTORY
Explaining World War II

WHY DID THE allies win World War II? This is such a straightforward question that we assume it has an obvious answer. Indeed the question itself is hardly ever asked. Allied victory is taken for granted. Was their cause not manifestly just? Despite all the dangers, was the progress of their vast forces not irresistible? Explanations of Allied success contain a strong element of determinism. We now know the story so well that we do not consider the uncomfortable prospect that other outcomes might have been possible. To ask why the Allies won is to presuppose that they might have lost or, for understandable reasons, that they would have accepted an outcome short of total victory. These were in fact strong possibilities. There was nothing preordained about Allied success.

This is a difficult view to accept. The long period of peace and prosperity for the west that set in with the Allies' triumph in 1945 could be said to show that Progress was once again in the saddle of history from which the momentary aberration of world war had unseated her. It has always been comforting in the west to see victory in 1945 as a natural or inevitable outcome, the assertion of right over might, of moral order over nihilistic chaos. For western liberals victory was a necessary outcome, a very public demonstration that in the scales of historical justice democracy counted for more than dictatorship, liberty for more than servitude. To hammer the point home, enemy

leaders were put on trial at Nuremberg and Tokyo for all the world to see what happened to regimes that thrived on crime.

Of course no one pretends that the triumph of freedom over despotism is an entirely sufficient explanation. The western powers defeated the Axis only in alliance with the Soviet dictatorship, which before 1941 they had shunned and vilified with only a little less vehemence than they reserved for Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union bore the brunt of the German onslaught and broke the back of German power. For years the western version of the war played down this uncomfortable fact, while exaggerating the successes of democratic war-making. Yet if the moral image of the war is muddied, the material explanation for victory seems unambiguous. Alliance between the British Empire, the Soviet Union and the United States created overwhelming superiority in manpower and resources. If there is any consensus about why the Allies won, it rests on the unassailable evidence that one side vastly outnumbered and outproduced the other.

There is danger here of determinism of a different sort. As one historian of the conflict recently put it, the Allies 'were certain to defeat Germany' once German and Japanese aggression brought them together in December 1941.[1] By 1943 the material gulf was huge. That year the Axis produced 43,000 aircraft; the Allies produced 151,000. The temptation has always been to assume that the figures speak for themselves. The balance of populations and raw materials greatly favoured the Allies: hence whatever the Axis powers did they would always come up against the strategic dead end of material inferiority. This is at best an unsophisticated argument. It begs endless questions about the comparative quality of weapons, or the gap between potential and real resources, or about how well weapons were used once the forces actually got them. It also ignores the very considerable efforts made by both sides to deny

resources to the other, for example the submarine offensive against British trade, or the Anglo-American bombing of German industry. There was a wide gap between potential and actual output on both sides. The statistics do not simply speak for themselves; they require interpreters.

It can be seen at once that there are no simple answers to the question of ‘why the Allies won’. Much popular belief about the war is illusion. Take, for example, the view that the war represented the triumph of democracy over tyranny. In reality democracy was narrowly confined in 1939 – to Britain, France, the United States and a handful of smaller European and British Commonwealth states – and was even more restricted once the conflict got under way. Far from being a war fought by a democratic world to bring errant dictators to heel, the war was about the very survival of democracy in its besieged heartlands. Victory in 1945 made democracy more secure in western Europe, America and the British Dominions, but outside these regions this form of government has had at best a chequered career in the half-century since the defeat of the Axis.

If anything the war made the world safe for communism, which was as embattled as democracy in the 1930s and close to eclipse by 1942. One of the most significant consequences of the war was the spread of communism in Europe and Asia and its consolidation in the Soviet Union. This outcome reflected the significant role played by Soviet forces in defeating Germany. There is now widespread recognition that the decisive theatre of operations lay on the eastern front. Without Soviet resistance it is difficult to see how the democratic world would have defeated the new German empire, except by sitting tight and waiting until atomic weapons had been developed. The great paradox of the Second World War is that democracy was saved by the exertions of communism.

This unpalatable fact is usually explained in terms of the common cause against Hitlerism, which helped to bridge the ideological gulf between capitalist democracy and communist authoritarianism. The pooling of resources and military effort was clearly a better way to secure survival than going it alone. But here, too, a word of caution is needed. Collaboration between the three Allied states could not be taken for granted. Until 1941 the Soviet Union was regarded by the west as a virtual ally of Nazi Germany following the signature of the German-Soviet Pact in August 1939, which ensured a steady supply of resources and food for Germany from Soviet production. When the Soviet Union was attacked by Germany in June 1941, there was a residue of profound distrust between the Soviet leadership and the west which had to be dispelled before any alliance could be built. There was still powerful anti-communist sentiment in Britain and the United States. 'How can anyone swallow the idea that Russia is battling for democratic principles?' asked Senator Taft in Congress. 'In the name of Democracy are we to make an alliance with the most ruthless dictator in the world?'[2]

The alliance was forged in the end from the bare metal of national self-interest. It survived as long as each side needed the other to help achieve victory, and no longer. 'We are much better off', wrote Roosevelt's Assistant Secretary of State, Adolph Berle, in his diary, 'if we treat the Russian situation for what it is, namely, a temporary confluence of interest.'[3] Throughout the war each side worried that the other might reach a separate agreement with the common enemy, and the naked pursuit of national interest led to endless squabbles between the three partners. In the end they fought separate wars, the Soviet Union on the eastern front, the United States in the Pacific, Britain and America in the Mediterranean and western Europe.

The coalition certainly did produce a great weight of resources in the Allies' favour as long as they fought

together. But there are illusions to dispel again. God does not always march with the big battalions. In World War I Britain, France and Russia mustered 520 divisions in the middle of 1917, but could not prevail over 230 German divisions and 80 Austrian. But in March 1918, with Russia out of the war, 365 German and Austrian divisions could not defeat the 281 of the Allies. Instead the German powers admitted defeat six months later with the balance of divisions 325 apiece.[4] Of course in World War I there were other factors at play: the Allies had more tanks and aircraft, and in 1918 there came a flow of vigorous American armies across the Atlantic; German and Austrian forces were hampered by collapsing home economies and declining enthusiasm for war; and so on. The basic figures are presented here only to illustrate the dubious value of relying on plain numbers to explain the outcome of wars.

Such simple analysis is particularly inappropriate in the case of the Second World War, when the material balance changed sharply several times during the course of the conflict. Up to 1942 the balance favoured the aggressors and might well have allowed them to win before American economic power could be placed in the scales. German victories brought the vast spoils of Continental Europe and of western Russia, turning the German empire in two years into an economic super-power, capable of turning out twice the quantity of steel that Britain and the Soviet Union together could muster. Japan’s seizure of the rich resources of northern China and of south-east Asia vastly improved her strategic position by 1942, while denying vital supplies of tin, rubber, oil and bauxite to the Allies. Even when America entered the war it took time before her enormous capacity could produce significant quantities of weapons, or, for that matter, the trained forces to use them. If the eventual outcome of the war owed something to the great Allied preponderance in material produced by American industrial strength, we still have to explain why the Axis

states failed to use their economic advantages when they had them.

What gradually swung the balance of resources back in the Allies' favour were two factors: the sheer speed and scale of American rearmament, which dwarfed anything that the Germans and Japanese, or even the British, had thought possible; and the swift revival of the Soviet economy after the mauling it received in 1941, when it sustained losses so severe that most pundits assumed the worst. Without the extraordinary exodus of Soviet machinery and labour from the war zones of the western Soviet Union to the harsh plains of Siberia, Stalin's armies would have been like the Tsar's in 1916, the soldiers in the second rank picking up the guns and boots of their dead vanguard as they scurried into battle. Against every expectation Soviet society worked feverishly to turn out the tanks and aircraft their soldiers needed. With only a quarter of the steel available to Germany, Soviet industry turned out more tanks, guns and planes than her German enemy throughout the war.

This surprising outcome also tells us something about the organisational capacities of the Axis powers. The huge disparity in weapons was due not only to American rearmament and Soviet revival, but also to the inability of their enemies to make the most of the resources they had. Some of this deficiency could be put down to the circumstances of war. Japan never got what she wanted from the oil-rich southern islands because American submarines lay across her supply lines, reaping a destructive harvest from Japan's poorly defended merchant shipping. Germany extracted far less than Hitler wanted from the captured areas of the Soviet Union because Soviet forces torched anything they could not carry away before the Germans arrived. The rain of bombs on German, Italian and Japanese cities slowly eroded once flourishing industries. By 1944 bombing reduced German output of

aircraft by 31 per cent, and of tanks by 35 per cent.[5] To all these external circumstances were added homegrown failures. Italian war production was riddled with corruption and administrative incompetence; Japan's economic effort was stifled by tensions between her soldiers and her businessmen, and a debilitating rivalry between the navy and the army; German industry and technology were the victims of ceaseless rivalry between the Nazi satraps and a military establishment whose technological fastidiousness made mass-production almost impossible. If these internal weaknesses had been resolved, the Axis by 1942 might well have proved the irresistible force.

Even when the balance-sheet of resources is broken down, the crude quantities tell us nothing about the quality of weapons produced from them. In fact there existed wide differences in levels of technical achievement between the two sides. The large forces of the Red Army in 1941 were a less formidable asset than they looked on paper because they lagged in the main behind German standards. But in 1942 the famous T-34 tank began to pour in large numbers from Soviet factories, and the quality of Soviet fighter aircraft improved sufficiently to make combat less one-sided. There were significant gaps on the German side too. The new generation of aircraft designed to replace the ageing models developed in the mid-1930s failed to materialise in the first years of war for a whole host of reasons, and the Luftwaffe was stuck for the duration of the conflict flying the models with which it started the war. The balance of air technology, in which Germany enjoyed an enviable lead in 1939, swung the Allies' way largely for reasons of Germany's own making. Even more striking was the reality of Germany's famous mobile forces. Though her scientists could produce rockets and jets by the end of the war, Germany failed to build the simpler trucks and jeeps needed to keep her armies on the move. By 1944 American and British forces were fully motorised, but the German

army was still using one and a quarter million horses. When Hitler's massive invasion force stood poised on the Soviet frontier in June 1941, it deployed 3,350 tanks but also 650,000 horses.[6]

The material balance also tells us little about *how* the weapons were used once the forces got them. This was not a question of economic power or technical ingenuity, but of fighting skills. During the war there were plenty of instances of poorly-armed troops fighting superbly; a super-abundance of weapons and equipment was no guarantee that forces could use them effectively. Fighting power was determined not just by weapons, but by training, organisation, morale and military elan. Both German and Japanese forces showed this as they were pushed back in 1944 and 1945: fighting against very large odds, with a deteriorating supply of weapons, they maintained their combat skills and a resolute willingness to fight almost to the end. Hitler was convinced throughout the war that the German soldier was a superior fighter, both more competent and more spiritually fortified than his opponent, and that this could in some sense compensate decisively for the greater numbers of the enemy. In Japanese society the military were supposed to be imbued with *bushido,* a spiritual shield that gave each soldier the strength to fight to the limits of endurance and self-sacrifice, even against overwhelming material odds. The emphasis placed on sheer fighting skills in Germany and Japan brought them remarkable victories between 1939 and 1942; it also forced their enemies to think more about the quality of their own forces, rather than their evident quantity.

The balance of fighting power, like that of resources, did not remain constant during the war. As might be expected, after the initial shock of defeat the Allies looked hard at the way their forces were trained, deployed and led. Lessons were quickly learned from Axis successes. The Allies were forced by the nature of their enemy to stretch their

strategic imaginations to embrace ways of warfare that were more ingenious and effective. By contrast the early victories lent a certain complacency to Axis strategy and operations; there were few fundamental changes made to the military recipe that had worked so well the first time around. The gap in fighting power between the two sides narrowed remarkably quickly. There are echoes here of the Napoleonic wars. In both cases the aggressor initially demonstrated superior fighting skills and leadership, against forces that were divided and operationally ineffectual. In both cases the gulf between the two sides narrowed over time as the lessons of early defeats were evaluated and the weaker forces were expanded and reformed. By the end of the war Allied forces performed much more effectively than they had done at first. Axis forces, on the other hand, like the armies of Napoleon, stagnated – both were remarkably skilled in retreat, but it was retreat none the less.

Clearly, then, the possession of bigger battalions fighting in a just cause is not a sufficient explanation of victory. We need to be much more precise about the reasons for Allied victory to find an explanation that is historically convincing, all the more so given the nature of the crisis that generated the war in the first place. In the 1930s the world order had been subjected to seismic shifts, rocked by forces which western liberal statesmen could scarcely understand. Democracy was in retreat everywhere, feebly keeping at bay the tide of violent imperialism, racial conflict and popular dictatorled nationalism. When war broke out there were widespread fears in the west that the march of Hitler’s brutal armies signalled the end of liberal civilisation. Well into the war the outcome hung in the balance, even after America joined the fray. The war was not some deviation from the natural development of the world towards a democratic utopia, but was a hard-fought

and unpredictable conflict about which of a number of very different directions the world was going to take.

Viewed from this perspective, Allied victory represented a remarkable reversal of fortunes. In the 1930s the western liberal world seemed at the point of eclipse. The Great War of 1914–18 had called into question the values of the self-confident and wealthy states that fought it. It plunged the world from civilisation into a new barbarism, giving lie to the Europeans' claim to be the bearers of peace and plenty. By the time it was over, Europe was impoverished, a whole generation of young Europeans brutalised and embittered. In Russia the war provoked social revolution as the Tsarist empire collapsed under the strain. The triumph of Lenin's Bolsheviks in 1917 gave birth to an age of bitter social and ideological conflict. Communism threatened to undermine the very foundations of capitalist society, and was loathed by anyone with an interest in the status quo. Yet in 1929 capitalism almost destroyed itself. The Great Crash brought the worst recession of the modern age. Millions were thrown out of work, and millions more plunged into poverty. The old political system could not cope. Communism was one alternative. In the 1930s men and women from all walks of society were drawn to the communist claim that socialist order must be preferable to capitalist chaos. Terrified at such a prospect, the anti-communist right swung towards militarism and fascism and the promise of social harmony and a strong nation.

The rise of extremist mass movements in the 1930s offered a profound and dangerous challenge to liberal democracy and conventional capitalism. On all sides could be heard a chorus of voices calling for a 'New Order' of planned economies and totalitarian societies. Communism and fascism offered a way out of what a great many had come to regard as a bankrupt political and economic system whose days were numbered. The fear that the existing order was in terminal decline produced a deep

sense of moral anxiety among those who sought to defend it. The violent conflicts between liberalism, fascism and socialism in the 1930s were expressed by their champions in terms of fundamental human values, in a language of moral decline and moral renewal. The spirit of the age was of crisis, decay, transformation.

This spirit was expressed internationally in the growing division between a small number of states anxious to preserve the existing balance of power and a larger number who sought to revise it. The defenders of the existing system were few indeed. At their forefront stood Britain and France. Both states lay at the centre of global empires which together covered one-third of the world's surface. Neither state had enough money or military resources to defend its worldwide interests, and each knew it. No other major power had much interest in the survival of the Franco-British world order. Other nations could see a gap widening between the apparent and the real strength of Britain and France. Less than a generation separated the two major world powers of the 1930s from the humiliating *débâcle* at Suez in 1956. The United States shared the liberal politics of western Europe, but was hostile to old-fashioned colonialism, and deeply distrusted what American leaders saw as a reactionary and decadent Europe. The Soviet leadership saw the old imperial states as historically doomed, and, though the Soviet Union did little in the 1930s to hasten their demise, Stalin looked in the long run for what he called a 'new equilibrium'.[7] There was no hint in the 1930s of the later wartime coalition.

The chief challenge to the existing equilibrium came from Germany, Italy and Japan. All three had been democratic states after the Great War, but their democracy turned sour in the heat of economic crisis and popular authoritarian nationalism. In 1922 Mussolini came to office in Italy at the head of the first fascist party to gain power; in 1931 Japan came gradually under the domination of the

military; in 1933 Hitler's National Socialist Party, profiting from the social and political chaos generated by the slump in Germany, stormed the ramparts of respectable politics and imposed single-man, single-party dictatorship with a little over one-third of the popular vote. All three states were united by resentment. They were, Mussolini argued, the 'proletarian states', dominated by the wealthy plutocracies, Britain, France and America. The fashionable view that empire was a source of political strength and economic nourishment, particularly for states that were over-populated and weak in natural resources, led all three to the conclusion that in the crisis-ridden 1930s their only hope of salvation lay in acquiring empires of their own. The term everyone used was 'living-space'; since the globe's territorial resources were finite, such space could be acquired only at the expense of someone else, and violently. The evident weakness of Britain and France and the unwillingness of either the United States or the Soviet Union to take their place in world politics, exposed a temporary window of opportunity, through which the three 'New Order' states hesitantly climbed.

In the space of half a dozen years the fragility of the old order was made transparently clear. In 1931 Japan invaded and occupied Manchuria, the industrially rich province of northern China. An uneasy truce followed. Japan refused to abandon her conquest in the face of western disapproval and no one had the strength or willingness to expel her by force. In 1937 a full-scale war broke out between Japan and China. Japanese leaders declared an Asian New Order and set out to conquer China's Pacific provinces. The attempt lasted to 1945 and Japan's defeat at American and Soviet hands. In 1935 Mussolini attacked Abyssinia to extend Italy's colonial empire, and to lay the foundation for Italian domination of the Mediterranean and northern Africa. Again western protests did nothing to reverse the aggressor. By May 1936 Abyssinia was conquered. In July

that year Italy sent forces to help Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Long before the onset of world war both Japan and Italy had abandoned any idea of peaceful settlement. They fought for their living space, and calculated correctly that none of the other powers would be willing to obstruct them by force.

Germany was the most dangerous component of the Axis, though German forces, unlike Japanese or Italian, did not fire a shot in anger until the invasion of Poland in September 1939 which launched world war. The source of the German threat was Hitler. Other German nationalists wanted Germany to reassert herself as a major state in the 1930s following years of enforced subservience to the victor states of 1918. Few Germans of any political shade had accepted the Allied demands for reparations and German disarmament, or been reconciled to the loss of territory to Poland and France. But very few Germans wanted to run the risk of war again. Hitler's outlook was quite different. Any account of the origins and course of the Second World War must give Hitler the leading part. Without him a major war in the early 1940s between all the world's great powers was unthinkable.

Hitler began life in 1889 in the small Austrian town of Braunauam-Inn, born into the vast multi-racial Habsburg empire, ruled by the grand old man of the dynasty, Emperor Franz-Joseph. He was the third son of an Austrian customs official. He was indulged by his parents, perhaps to compensate for the death of all but one of their other children. Hitler's parents both died by the time he was eighteen. The year his mother died, in 1907, Hitler failed to gain entry to the Vienna Academy where he had hoped to pursue an artistic career, the one thing in which he was interested. Over the next six years he did little, living off a legacy from his mother, painting when he could, escaping from the Austrian authorities who wanted him to do military service. He had no desire to fight for the largely