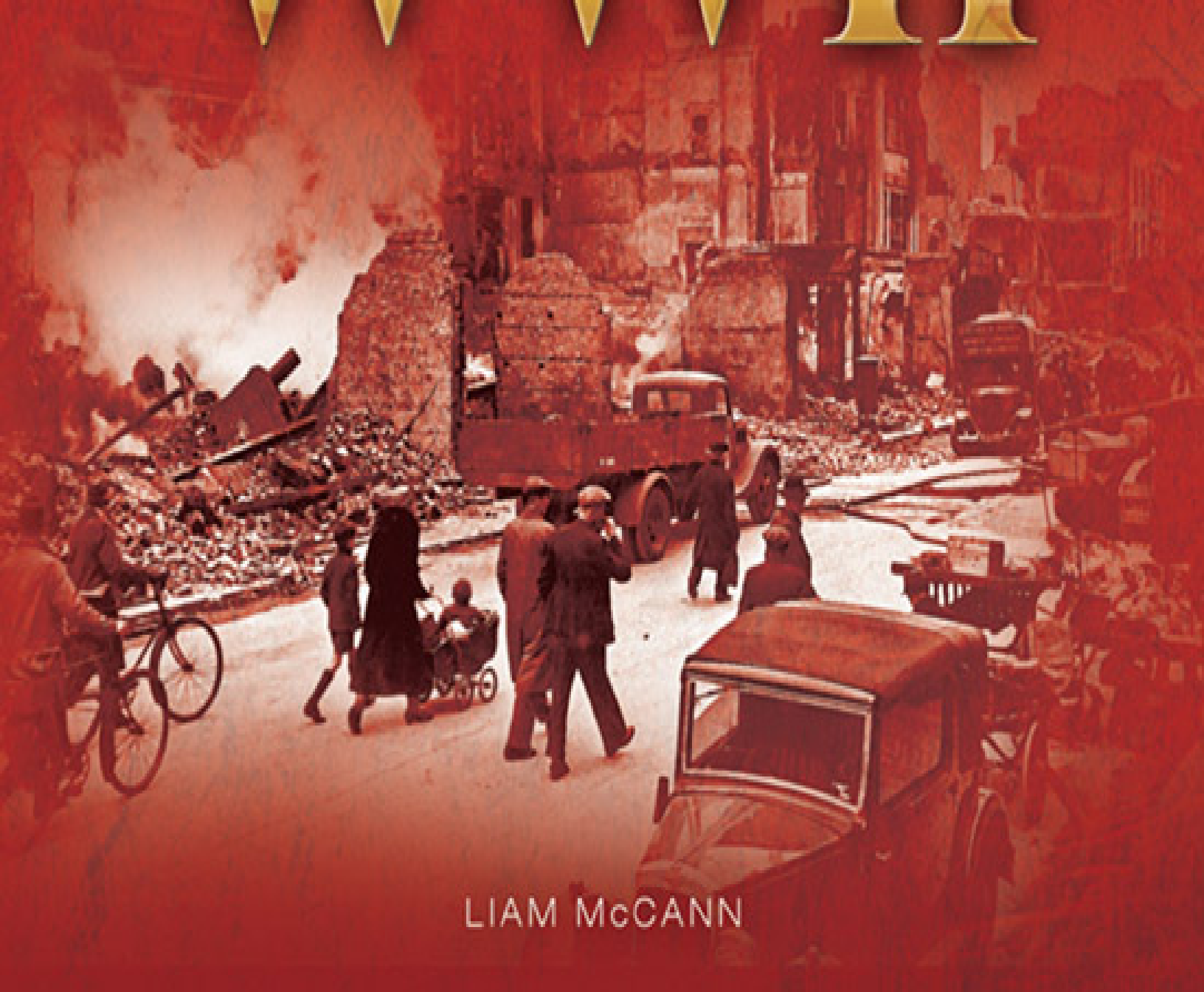


THE CONCISE HISTORY OF

# WWII



LIAM McCANN

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# Introduction

**B**y 1938 war in Europe seemed inevitable. It had only been twenty years since the war to end all wars, and the horrors of conflict were still fresh in the mind, but that didn't stop all sides re-arming and preparing for yet more bloodshed. Germany may have been defeated in 1918 but it remained the largest and most powerful nation-state on the continent.

Many believed that the settlement at the end of World War One was neither clean nor decisive. The treaty signed at Versailles didn't make much of an allowance for peace as it punished Germany by confiscating territory and forcing the people to pay reparations to help rebuild France and reduce the Allied debt to America. The German army was to be almost completely demilitarised, deprived of its modern weapons and slashed to a fraction of its former size. So instead of negating Germany as a threat, the settlement led to deep-seated anger and resentment among its people. These feelings were only heightened when the country's economy spiralled out of control in the early 1920s. The downturn left millions penniless and contributed to more bitterness in what was the country's darkest hour.

The people believed that they hadn't been beaten in battle and had actually been betrayed on the Western Front by incompetent leaders and at home by cowardly and weak politicians. They needed someone to turn to who would

relieve them from their suffering and who would avenge the humiliation heaped on them by the West.



*William Orpen's painting depicting the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors in 1919*



*The League of Nations building in Geneva*

The Americans, British and French drew up proposals for a League of Nations that would resolve international disputes by diplomatic rather than military means. The old and worryingly powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved into smaller, weaker states like Czechoslovakia, but there were still underlying issues that needed to be addressed, such as the allegiance of the millions of Germans living in these new states. It was this desire to be reunited with their brothers throughout central Europe that was the time-bomb waiting to explode.





*The cover of Mein Kampf, the book Hitler wrote while imprisoned*

President Woodrow Wilson was overruled by congress on his return to the US and America was forced to withdraw from the League of Nations. Without its most powerful member, the league was bereft of the strength it would need should territorial disputes arise.



*A fifty-million-mark banknote from 1923*

Germany's fledgling Weimar Republic was immediately threatened when right-wing nationalists clashed with revolutionary communists. Tension escalated when ordinary people's savings were wiped out during the hyperinflationary years and economic turmoil. The time was right for a skilled orator – who worked receptive audiences by preaching extreme right-wing views – to begin his ascent to power.

Adolf Hitler had been born in Austria but he'd fought for Germany with distinction in the First World War. After the conflict he returned to Munich and was soon recruiting followers to the once-marginalised National Socialist Party. In October 1923 Hitler believed he had enough support to overthrow the republic but he was stabbed in the back by supposedly loyal followers and the coup failed. He was imprisoned for nine months, during which time he wrote *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)*, which blamed Germany's weak economy on the Jews and claimed the way to solve the country's problems was to seize territory in Eastern Europe.



*Adolf Hitler with Paul von Hindenburg shortly before the president's death in 1934*

When he was released he realised he could only assume power via legitimate democratic means so he used his oratorical skills to recruit more people to the cause. But when the Weimar Republic survived the economic downturn in the early 1920s and brought five years of prosperity, support for the extremists dwindled. It seemed the national socialists would be consigned to history.

In 1929, however, Hitler was thrown a lifeline when the US stock market crashed. This Great Depression swept across the world and unemployment reached six million in Germany by the end of the decade. Hitler used the unrest in the country to recruit millions of young people to the Nazi movement and he soon offered a viable political alternative.



*Chiang Kai-shek commanded Allied forces in China from 1942 to 1945*

In the 1932 elections, Hitler's Nazis became the dominant force in Germany's parliament but he refused to form a coalition. To avoid political as well as economic turmoil, in January 1933 President Hindenburg proclaimed Hitler Germany's chancellor, the head of its government. A month later the Reichstag burned down so Hitler was given emergency powers and he immediately banned all other political parties. He may have risen to power democratically but he then abolished the freedoms by which he'd been elected. When Hindenburg died the following year, Hitler declared himself Führer, absolute leader of all Germany.

Hitler initially concentrated on rebuilding German confidence and lowering its runaway unemployment. He put millions back to work building the autobahn system but he was also secretly ignoring the constraints of the Treaty of Versailles by beginning a huge program of re-armament. For two years the country stockpiled arms and machinery until, in 1935, Hitler blatantly flouted the conditions imposed by the West when he unveiled his new air force, the Luftwaffe. Later that year the French-occupied Saarland voted to return to German rule, and in 1936 Germany reoccupied the demilitarised Rhineland. Britain and France didn't object because they knew the territories and population were rightfully German.





*Italian artillery on the Abyssinian border in 1936*

Hitler wasn't alone with his expansionist aspirations: in the Far East, Japan's military pretensions manifested itself in the invasion of China in 1937. Japan was a global power and had been a member of the League of Nations, but the country was a confusing blend of democracy, outdated but popular feudal traditions, and an all-powerful emperor who was viewed as a living god. Its population was exploding and it needed natural resources to feed and house them. They already had troops in Manchuria and could also look to expand into the British colonies like Burma, Malaya and Hong Kong; the French outpost of Indochina; and the Dutch East Indies. The US held various small territories in the Pacific but they had downsized their navy after the Great War and were not strong enough to counter any Japanese aggression. With the US suffering in the depression, Japan made its first move into the mainland in 1931 but it was another six years before they struck at the heart of China. With Mao Tsetung and Chiang Kai-shek