

The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933-1939

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In the beginning was Hitler.

Some might balk at the seeming simplicity of this assertion; others might dismiss it as ignoring decades of recent scholarship. Yet there is nothing simplistic about the [second](#) [2] and concluding volume of Zara Steiner's magisterial and monumental history of Great Power politics between the two world wars; nor is it in any sense an old-fashioned book. On the contrary, this is a lucid and authoritative account of the international politics of Europe's dark decade – an account that weaves together an awe-inspiring range of different strands of global developments in a vast synthesis that is informed by a life-time's immersion in the period and its archives. Its title is suggestive of a Manichaeian struggle between the forces of good and evil. And, of course, to a large extent the history of the 1930s is precisely that. It was, as Steiner argues in the prologue to this book, a period 'with few heroes, two evil Titans, and an assortment of villains, and knaves. I have not enjoyed their company' – and who could blame her. Her moral judgement is sometimes stark. Her skill at limning the complexities faced by the decision-makers is therefore all the more remarkable.

This vast book is, indeed, based on an assumption of the primacy of politics. The emphasis here is firmly on the men – and they were all men – who shaped the course of events, the heads of government and their foreign ministers, ambassadors and generals, foreign ministry clerks and staff officers. *Triumph of the Dark* offers skilfully drawn and illuminating portraits of the main actors. Yet this is not a history of European politics as seen from a succession of embassy windows. Much of her analysis is underpinned by an impressive grasp of the economic conditions of the decade and their impact on its international politics, and

of the thorny issues of defence and armaments. Her account, for instance, of Berlin's use of clearing accounts and payment agreements to create a German-dominated *Wirtschaftsraum* or economic zone is masterly. Nor does she ignore the ideological forces at work. She argues convincingly that 'belief systems separated the nations from one another', that, indeed, 'ideological assumptions affected the way statesmen and their advisers saw the world'. But such predispositions did not predetermine the course of actions these men decided upon. There was, as Steiner points out, a certain fluidity to Great Power politics that transgressed ideological barriers, as instanced by the attempts by London and Paris to treat with Mussolini's Italy or, most infamously, by the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939. The one exception was Hitler, as Steiner argues: 'Obsessed with the international Jewish conspiracy that was closing around the *Reich*, he felt he had to launch his war before it was too late'.

And so, in the beginning was Hitler. It is with the German dictator and his intentions, Zara Steiner contends, 'that any student of European international history must begin'. The Hitler who emerges from this 1,200-odd pages-thick volume is an ideologue to be sure, ruthlessly determined in the pursuit of his fixed ambitions. But he was equally ruthless in his canny opportunism. Nearly six decades ago, Hugh Trevor-Roper warned against the temptation of 'extrapolating low intelligence from [Hitler's] moral degradation'.⁽¹⁾ Steiner is never in danger of making that error: 'The *Führer*, if impulsive and temperamental, could also be extraordinarily patient. [...] [H]is arguments were rational and well developed. Hitler had the ability to respond flexibly to changes in the European situation without losing sight of his ultimate goals'.

If, as Steiner argues, the old 'intentionalists vs. functionalists' debate has lost much of its salience, Hitler's ultimate goals nevertheless hold the key to his political moves right from the moment he was made chancellor in January 1933. They were fixed long before then; and they were grandiose in scale and ambition. They were based on a particularly perverted permutation of Social Darwinism, one that postulated that international politics were a perpetual racial struggle for survival and supremacy. With that in mind, Hitler's ultimate strategic twin-goals were the conquest of Germany's much needed *Lebensraum* in the vastness of Eastern Europe and the extermination of European Jewry. The two, as Steiner argues persuasively, were inextricably linked. Both were to lay the basis of a new world order, a German-dominated, Aryan world order. Foreign policy was the key to the attainment of this aim. But this was not conventional Great Power politics any more, nor was it a continuation of traditional German foreign policy. The latter had relatively limited, and arguably rational, aims in view, largely centred on the issue of territorial revision. Hitler's objective was European domination and, indeed, world power; and that entailed war on a vast scale, and fought for its own sake. Nor did his foreign policy conform to the established norms of diplomatic conduct. Instead he used the full register of means, from pacific public speech to bellicose notes, from sabre rattling to propaganda warfare, and from bilateral deals to the intimidation of visiting foreign statesmen, with 'weekend surprises' being a particular favourite of his.

Indeed, Steiner explicitly refutes A. J. P. Taylor's interpretation of the German dictator as a run-of-the-mill, traditional German politician who, in a fit of absent-mindedness, had stumbled into a world war in 1939. For Steiner there is no doubt, this was Hitler's war, even if it was not the sort of war he wanted, or at a time of his choosing.

Historians of modern Germany will for ever argue whether Hitler's compelling charisma was the dominant feature of the Nazi regime or whether it was marked by manipulation and menace. To an extent this debate is less relevant to the field of foreign policy. Here the final decision lay with the *Führer*. Even so, Steiner accepts the 'polycratic' nature of the regime, and the more or less well-ordered chaos that prevailed at all levels at Berlin. Different power centres and the ambitions of individuals in the upper echelons of the Nazi party hierarchy, the *Wilhelmstrasse* or the armed forces thus created cross-currents that affected the short-term course of German policy. But they could not affect its general direction. Ultimately, all these individuals were 'working towards the *Führer*'. A particularly egregious example was Joachim von Ribbentrop, the *quondam* champagne salesman-turned-Hitler-courtier who became first ambassador at London and then foreign minister. His vanity was exceeded only by his monumental tactlessness (in London he was generally known as 'von Brickendrop'). Others, such as Hermann Göring, occasionally ventured into private diplomacy, e.g. by using Swedish businessmen to pursue the option of a deal with Great Britain.

Even saner men, mostly diplomats, members of the traditional elites, did little to moderate German foreign policy. Ernst von Weizsäcker, the permanent head of the foreign ministry, or the ambassador at Rome, Ulrich von Hassell, might have deprecated aspects of the Nazi regime, but they, too, worked towards the *Führer*. They did so for a mixture of reasons, traditional German expansionism, fatalistic resignation, or the (misguided) belief that they were preventing worse things from happening.

Of course, Hitler did not create the international situation in existence in 1933. As Zara Steiner expounded in the first volume of her study of the inter-war period, the years 1928–33 were ‘hinge years’. The events of that time had exposed the fragility of the post-1919 international order; they had weakened the system; and they had shown the limits of global cooperation.⁽²⁾ But Hitler exploited that situation. He made the political weather, and others had to reach for their umbrellas.

What about the other leaders? Steiner is no less trenchant in her judgement of them. She rightly rejects recent attempts to rehabilitate Benito Mussolini. Throughout the period, ‘[t]he Duce was like a weathervane on a windy day’. His bombastic attempts to conjure up a latter-day Roman Empire, his reckless Abyssinian adventure, and his support for the fellow-fascist Franco during the Spanish Civil War ultimately exposed the hollowness of Italian pretensions. *Il Duce’s* posturing reminds one of Bismarck’s *aperçu* ‘Poor Italy – such huge appetite, such poor teeth’. Just how rotten Italy’s teeth had become after a surfeit of the Mussolini diet was revealed in 1939, when, despite the ‘Pact of Steel’, the Italian leader sought refuge in a declaration of ‘non-belligerence’, a bellicose sounding word for neutrality. Indeed, what is striking about Italian decision-making is the lack of attention to detail (not just by the lazy Ciano), the absence of any forethought (not just on the part of the *Duce*), and a habit of drifting along. In the end, as Steiner demonstrates, Italy acted as Hitler’s jackal, trying to snatch up what morsels she could.

Stalin is the other ‘evil titan’ of Steiner’s tale. His regime represented a different kind of tyranny. Stalin’s purges, as Steiner argues, ‘were rooted in Stalin’s fierce determination to establish his control over all men and institutions that might threaten his monopoly of power’. His conduct of foreign affairs was blinkered, infused with paranoia and conditioned by the parameters of Soviet ideology. In its effect it was malignant. To Stalin’s mind there was little difference between the various ‘capitalist’ powers. The Western intervention in the Russian civil war cast a long shadow indeed. Stalin was ultimately driven by *realpolitik* calculations, even if he was forced to justify his decisions with reference to Marxist-Leninist doctrine (fortunately for him, an endlessly flexible doctrine). Thus, the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, and the Soviet participation in the carving up of Poland were an attempt to buy time. Even so, Stalin had his own delusions, ignoring evidence of German designs on the Soviet Union until almost the end. Indeed, he continued to assure the *Führer* that ‘[t]he USSR is interested in a strong Germany and will not let it be beaten’.

French and British leaders do not emerge well from this book. The politicians at Paris were slippery customers, their lack of steadfastness made worse by their acute fears about France’s vulnerability. As Robert Vansittart remarked of Pierre Laval ‘the only white thing about Laval was his tie’ – and even that was rarely sent to the laundry. Georges Bonnet, one of the many foreign ministers in the revolving-door cabinets of the period, was congenitally defeatist and constitutionally dishonest. Prime Minister Edouard Daladier was perhaps more clear-sighted about international politics. After Munich he predicted accurately that Britain and France would face fresh German demands ‘within six months’. But the ‘Bull of the Vaucluse’ was better known for having the horns of a snail. When he talked tough, it was usually an infallible indication of imminent surrender.

What about British politicians? For all his later attempts to reinvent himself as an early anti-appeaser, Anthony Eden was fickle and disingenuous, not always on top of his brief and rarely missing an opportunity to wobble. When he finally resigned, he did so in fit a pique, not on a matter of principle. His successor, Lord Halifax, was aloof and his famed sense of Christian morality seems to have been suspended for much of his period in office. To his mind, Hitler was an odd-ball, certainly, but scarcely an evil man. Indeed, it was one of his ambitions to welcome the *Führer* to London, and to see him walk through the gates of Buckingham Palace, arm in arm with the King.

As for Neville Chamberlain, Steiner gives short shrift to the attempts by recent revisionists to rehabilitate him. Whereas the latter tend to argue from a limited basis of material, often from Chamberlain's own pen or that of his cronies, Steiner argues from a commanding knowledge of the French, German, Italian and Soviet sources as well. These allow her not only to contextualize the appeasement policy, but also to arrive at a cogent judgement in the round. Of course, Chamberlain was not the first Conservative prime minister to come a cropper in Europe, nor was he the last. But he was in a league of his own. Steiner is scathing about his vaulting vanity and inflated ideas about his own abilities – 'his hubristic ambitions and self-confidence were extraordinary'. In reality, Chamberlain was a man of limited experience and limited insight. He was by no means a weak man, but one prone to wishful thinking and adept at ignoring reality when it did not conform to his preconceived ideas. Of course, his anxiety to avoid war was nothing but admirable. Indeed, on reading Steiner's account one is reminded of Harold Nicolson's remark that Chamberlain and Halifax ventured into diplomacy with all the high-mindedness of two young curates stepping for the first time into a public house. Both failed entirely to understand Hitler. Perhaps, it was always difficult to understand that a great and civilised country was enthralled with a dismal little man, albeit one gifted with demonic charisma. But they projected their own abhorrence of war onto others, and so never grasped that Nazism saw its ultimate destiny in war, and that therefore appeasement had no chance of success. Both assumed that Hitler was amenable to personal persuasion and judicious concessions. At the time of Munich Chamberlain thought that all Hitler's ambitions were limited to absorbing the Sudeten German areas of the Czechoslovak Republic. What he really wanted was 'to smash Czechoslovakia'. True, the Munich agreement thwarted him in that ambition in the short-term, but he got what he wanted not even half-a-year later.

Steiner is harsh in her judgement of the British government's reluctance to define a clear policy in Europe. It was driven by illusions and wishful thinking about the nature of the Hitler regime and, in turn, it encouraged German illusions about Britain and her likely neutrality in a continental conflict. That said, Zara Steiner offers a balanced account of Anglo-French policy. She is sensitive to the dilemmas faced by the decision-makers in London and Paris. She accepts that the range of options available to them was much more limited than most of their critics appreciated at the time. Public opinion shuddered at the thought of renewed carnage in 'Flanders fields'; and, in general, the public recoiled at the prospect of large armaments programmes, military conscription, or any policy that might conceivably entail the risk of war. Indeed, for all of Chamberlain's many shortcomings, one wonders whether Steiner was right to concentrate the blame for the failure of British foreign policy on Neville Chamberlain personally. Appeasement, i.e. targeted concessions to accommodate what were deemed to be legitimate grievances, was supported by the whole cabinet and by all those who had come to the conclusion that troubles in Europe would end only if frontiers were redrawn to correct the assumed mistakes made at Paris in 1919.

While this gives more context to Chamberlain's position, Steiner is nevertheless right to criticise him for sticking to the carcass of failed policies. To the end, for instance, he believed in the moderating influence of Mussolini, and to that end he pursued the *Duce* with diplomatic initiatives. To force Hitler to moderate his policy was also the object of British rearmament after 1936, as Steiner shows clearly. Indeed, as late as the end of July 1939, Chamberlain smugly concluded that he had Hitler where he wanted him: 'he is fulfilling my expectations ... the longer the war is put off, the less likely it is to come at all'. It came not quite six weeks later.

The history of the 1930s is one of crises. Any strategic analysis of the period must take account of a bewildering array of factors and often contradictory currents. Steiner deals with them with great aplomb. In

crisp and lucid prose, and always clear-sighted in her analysis, she guides the reader through the shoals, eddies, and torrents of the international politics of the years before 1939. *The Triumph of the Dark* offers an interlocking narrative of events in Europe and in East Asia – for once the publisher’s blurb undersells a book. Steiner shows how Hitler sought to widen the cracks in the remaining 1919 structures on coming to office in 1933, structures that were finally brought down by Mussolini’s Abyssinian adventure and the civil war in Spain. Afterwards, collective efforts were a thing of the past, as the chancelleries of Europe reverted to the methods of ‘old diplomacy’ and sought bilateral alliances and agreements. 1937 clearly emerges as the decisive year for Hitler. From then on he was determined on war. Perhaps, more controversially, Steiner argues that a military response to Hitler would have been a realistic option at the time of the Sudeten crisis in 1938. The military balance was not in Germany’s favour – German generals, in fact, warned Hitler that he had overreached himself. Indeed, as Steiner argues persuasively, *pace* the revisionists, the Power that gained most from delaying conflict at Munich was Germany. However, the chiefs of staff in Britain counselled that the country was in no condition to fight then; and it would have been a courageous prime minister who ignored such advice.

And so, right to the end, it was Hitler. Zara Steiner offers a dark tale. There are no bright lights anywhere. Given the dismal nature of this decade, historians have often been prone either to pontificate or to exculpate. Steiner does neither. She has written a masterly conclusion to her equally magisterial study of the Great Power politics of the 1920s. ‘Too much history’, Lewis Namier complained in early 1939, ‘is written by don-bred dons with no knowledge or understanding of the practical problems of statecraft’.⁽³⁾ Zara Steiner does not fall into that category. For all her trenchant criticisms of the decision-makers and her sharp put-downs, her analysis of the strategic complexities of the 1930s is shrewd and her judgement always balanced. This book is that rarest of books – it is a book of profound wisdom.

Notes

1. H.R. Trevor-Roper, ‘Hitlers Kriegsziele’, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 8, 1 (1960), 122.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Z. S. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2005), ch. 12.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Namier to Churchill, 14 Feb. 1939, as quoted in J. Namier, *Lewis Namier: A Biography* (London, 1979), p. 229.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy with this review and does not wish to respond.

Other reviews:

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/11/war-history-hitler-british> [3]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [4]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-triumph-of-the-dark-european-international-history-1933-1939-by-zara-steiner-2286457.html> [5]

Foreign Affairs

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History Today

<http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/09/european-history-triumph-dark> [7]

New Republic

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- [6] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136533/zara-steiner/the-triumph-of-the-dark-european-international-history-1933-1939>
- [7] <http://www.historytoday.com/blog/2011/09/european-history-triumph-dark>
- [8] <http://www.tnr.com/book/review/the-triumph-dark-zara-steiner>