



2009.08.03

Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions That Changed the World, 1940–1941*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Pp. xxv, 623. ISBN 978–0–14–311372–0.

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This imposing volume analyzes ten key decisions taken in 1940 and 1941 that shaped World War II. Of course, as Kershaw notes, that war encompassed many turning points; in his view, the linked decisions examined here produced a world-wide, genocidal cataclysm. Seven of the ten were made by the Axis powers, a reflection of the situation noted by George Kennan: at the beginning of WWII “Western democracy had become militarily outclassed. The world balance of power had turned decisively against it.”¹ *Fateful Choices* is a historian’s book, not a political scientist’s; unlike Graham Allison’s well-known examination of the Cuban missile crisis,² this work emphasizes the particular rather than the theoretical and the universal. Kershaw draws attention to human agency, arguing that “the fateful choices that were made were not predetermined or axiomatic” (476). Putting readers “behind a ... leader’s desk” (6), he uses a rich collection of primary and secondary sources to explore the personal, ideological, bureaucratic, and strategic issues that shaped these decisions. However, many readers may want to consult a military history to fill in some additional detail.³

Kershaw begins with a decision that had enormous ramifications for the dimensions and duration of WWII. The place: London in late May 1940. The situation: the imminent expulsion of British troops from Europe and the likely defeat of France. The question: should the British government fight on or explore an accommodation with Hitler to preserve England’s independence? The protagonists in these “vital, intense, and occasionally heated deliberations” (47): the new prime minister, Winston Churchill, and Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax. According to Kershaw, Churchill carried his point “by reason,” through force of argument, in the War Cabinet, which took a “collective” decision to continue the war (49). Interestingly, the British Constitution permitted policy makers to make so fundamental a decision without having to consult Parliament, the press, or outside pressure groups. In Kershaw’s view, this decision had the “most profound implications” (47): Hitler now found his strategic options shaped by the likelihood of a two-front war and the possibility of American intervention on behalf of Britain. John Lukacs told this story a decade ago.⁴ Kershaw’s version, similarly based on the primary sources, though much shorter, is admirably clear and cogent.

American foreign policy decision making is considerably messier. In two chapters, Kershaw shows how the United States extended economic aid to Britain through Lend Lease and then waged an undeclared war on Germany to protect those supplies as they crossed the Atlantic. Again, the story is not new—James McGregor Burns and Robert Dallek⁵ have covered this ground—but it is well-told here. The American people were deeply polarized on foreign policy questions. The increasingly aggressive policies of the Axis powers alarmed Franklin Roosevelt and most of his advisors, who felt “Hitler posed a direct threat to the United States” (240). This position became especially clear after the summer of 1940. However, broader American opinion was still sharply divided in the aftermath of WWI. Pollsters found the majority of Americans opposed to direct intervention and ambivalent concerning steps short of war. The American constitution and political system dictated that the President could not just ignore the “isolationists” in Congress, at

1. *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1951) 75.

2. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (1971; 2nd ed. NY: Longman, 1999).

3. E.g., Williamson Murray & Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2000).

4. In *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 1999).

5. See, respectively, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (NY: Harcourt, 1956) and *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1979).

newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune*, or in organizations such as the America First Committee. Kershaw portrays FDR as following an “extremely cautious path between neutrality and belligerence,” interrupted by moments of “boldness,” such as Lend Lease (187, 239); “at no point” in this long process “did Roosevelt consider taking America into war” (242). It was necessary to educate the American people and build a consensus for action. This approach periodically infuriated his American supporters, Churchill, and some later historians. In Kershaw’s view, “the President’s caution, however maddening, was wise” (242). As a consequence, a united nation entered the war in December 1941. In Kershaw’s view, the examples of Britain and the United States illustrate the advantages of systematic and rational processes guided by thoughtful leadership.

Fascist and Communist leaders made a series of disastrous choices, but, as Kershaw hastens to show, not necessarily irrational ones. In fact, they were the natural outcome of ideology, governmental systems, and leaders’ personalities. In Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union, decisions flowed from *force majeure*, rather than force of argument. Apocalyptic ideology operated in closed governmental systems to produce ultimately fatal choices. Kershaw stresses that the four nations were organized quite differently. The German and the Soviet states were the most narrowly constituted. In National Socialist Germany, Hitler controlled state institutions staffed largely with supporters of his worldview. Doubts were occasionally raised and alternative strategies proposed—for example, the navy’s Mediterranean focus as an alternative to invading Russia—but Hitler could and did easily ignore them. He envisaged domination of a world from which Jews had disappeared, but knew that time and resources were not on Germany’s side. Thus, the attack on Russia in 1941 was necessary both to destroy Jewish-dominated communism and to prevent a potentially invincible coordination of British, American, and Soviet forces. “It was madness, but there was method in it”(90).

As for declaring war on the United States in December 1941 “without consultation” (424), that decision was simply a matter of “anticipating the inevitable” (423) by taking advantage of Japan’s current military power. And the Holocaust, “a decision [or set of decisions] like no other in history” (412), reflected the “logical” and “inexorable” consequence of “demonic anti-Semitism” (433), part of the larger goal of the war itself.

Stalin operated in a similar context: he personally controlled a bureaucratic apparatus where “toadying”—not rational argument—was the norm. Aware of Soviet weakness, and fearing, even expecting, an attack from Germany, he desperately sought to avoid war. But “ideological preconceptions” (293) led him to ignore warnings from Britain and instead rely on “his own intuition and judgment” (244). In Kershaw’s view, this was “one of the most extraordinary miscalculations of all time” (290) and a direct consequence of a system of “highly personalized rule” (296). It nearly led to the destruction of the Soviet Union.

Kershaw indicates that the political systems of Italy and Japan concentrated less power in the hands of their leaders, but they too were subject to ideology and egotism. Mussolini’s fascist state was a “semi pluralistic institutional system” (141), but institutional restraints were weakening by 1940. Increasingly the elites displayed “subservience, servility, and sycophancy” (182) and endorsed Mussolini’s dreams of renewed empire. Thus, when il Duce demanded a declaration of war on England and France in 1940 and later an invasion of Greece, Italy’s non-fascist elements acquiesced, despite the general acknowledgement of the country’s military and economic weaknesses. “These decisions reflected the dictator’s severe personal shortcomings, [as well as] the imbecility of the political system” (183).

Kershaw shows that the Japanese state, too, was pluralistic, but its elite was driven by grievances over past treatment by the West, economic insecurities, and a dream of national greatness reinforced by popular jingoism. Thus, “no significant individual or faction stood against the imperative of expansion” (377) and the anticipated war with the United States. Well aware of their nation’s weaknesses and the overwhelming strength of the United States, Japan’s leaders nevertheless preferred likely destruction to compromise. Many readers will catch a strong whiff of tragic inevitability in all of these decisions—despite Kershaw’s inclinations.

While readers might question Kershaw’s argument against inevitability based on the evidence he presents, his portrait of closed governing systems making “logical” but fatal choices is convincing. The expe-

riences of our own times strengthen his argument. Dictatorships, especially those driven by ideology, continue to be prone to disastrous choices. Ideology fuels desires, while the narrow base of advisors' voices fosters paranoia and rash actions. Hitler and Stalin, meet Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong Il.

But democracies have not been immune to many of these problems either. Were the policies followed by the United States, Great Britain, or France, for that matter, during the 1920s anything but delusional? Dunkirk and Pearl Harbor were the results of repeated policy failures that grew out of both intellectual and procedural weaknesses. Was England's choice to risk all in 1940 to *remain* a great power any more sensible than, say, Japan's choice to risk all to *become* a great power? And, as Kershaw reminds us, isolationist ideology had achieved a stranglehold on foreign policy in an America nursing grievances dating back to WWI. These conditions shaped defense choices in very dangerous ways, reflecting "the deeper mistakes of understanding and attitude ... of [American] society in general." Kershaw laments "the general ignorance of the historical processes, ... lack of attention to the power realities" and tendency to follow "emotion" rather than reason (88, 84). In his view, American democracy could be as delusional as other systems. Sadly, the experience of the United States (and Britain) after 9/11, especially in Iraq, suggests just that: our attraction to ideologically driven visions and willingness to exclude alternative views in fervid times have led us to profoundly bad decisions. No system has a monopoly on error.