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Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 1222. ISBN 978-0-19-921200-2.

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This book, together with its well-received predecessor, *The Light That Failed*,¹ provides a brilliant and definitive history of the origins of the Second World War in Europe. They also shed light on the relationship between the advent of war in Europe and the brewing conflict in the Far East. Author Zara Steiner (Univ. of Cambridge), a highly regarded British diplomatic historian,² is a practitioner of the “new international history,” concerned not only with the interactions of statesmen, but also with partisan politics, economic developments, ideological currents, non-governmental organizations, the press, and public opinion. In short, hers is a much-needed, more nuanced approach than that of old-fashioned diplomatic history.

Steiner begins by exploring the convoluted interplay of economic crises, ideological pathologies, popular anxieties, and desperation of German elites that led to Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933. She then examines how he consolidated his power within both the Nazi party and the German government and explains how the National Socialist regime, despite scant financial resources, propelled the dramatic growth of the German armed forces.

The emphasis here is on the international context of these developments, especially the decline of multilateral collaboration that facilitated Hitler’s advances.

[Hitler] took power when the international order was already in disarray and when the events of 1928-1933 had weakened the global order and exposed the limits of international cooperation. Almost all the countries in Europe and beyond had turned to the pursuit of nationalist economic policies.... The United States ... hardly entered into the strategic calculations of the European nations.... The League’s perceived failure to check the Japanese expansion into Manchuria and Japan’s departure from the League of Nations was a blow both to the Washington and Geneva systems. (95)

Yet “the triumph of the dark” was not preordained: “whatever the damage done, the reconstruction of the 1920s was not inevitably doomed to collapse by the start of the 1930s. Rather, the argument here is that the demise of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Hitler proved the motor force of destructive systemic change” (1043). Steiner’s Hitler is driven by (mostly racial) ideological fantasies. Well before he came to power, his beliefs about racial inequality and the inevitability of race warfare had laid the foundations for an unalterable master plan of conquest, enslavement, and extermination. On immediate questions of tactics, the Führer could be almost infinitely flexible (and devious), but his ultimate goals remained fixed. This presentation rejects both A.J.P. Taylor’s picture of Hitler unintentionally stumbling into the Second World War³ and the “functionalist” explanation⁴ of atrocities and genocide as unanticipated results of the exigencies of war. Although other men and other nations contributed to making war and genocide possible, the overwhelming responsibility for the horrors of the 1930s and 40s belongs to the German dictator. Steiner writes of Hitler’s final decision for war at the end of August 1939 that “this was war by calculation and not by miscalculation” (1005).

While Hitler’s boldness, ruthlessness, and calculation are important parts of the story, so too are the weak and indecisive reactions of the Western Powers. Throughout the 1930s, Britain sought to avoid war

1. Subtitle: *European International History 1919-1933* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2005).

2. See her *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* [1977], 2nd ed., with Keith Neilson (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

3. *The Origins of the Second World War* (NY: Atheneum 1962 [orig. 1961]).

4. See, e.g., Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1992); Götz Aly and Susanne Hein, *Architects of Annihilation: Auschwitz and the Logic of Destruction*, trans. A.G. Blunden (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2003); and Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2003).

and reach a settlement with resurgent Germany to protect itself and western Europe. Steiner maintains that some British statesmen actually believed that a combination of concessions might really satisfy Hitler, while others saw the diplomacy of appeasement as a means to buy time for rearmament. Virtually everyone in the British government agreed on the desirability of a western European settlement with Germany, even if that meant abandoning eastern Europe to the Nazis. Steiner blames London and Paris for their complicity in undermining the League of Nations, the rule of law, and multilateral international cooperation. Eastern Europe was left to its fate: “the British did not believe in the ‘indivisibility of peace’ and continued to assume that what happened in Eastern Europe did not touch their security concerns” (161).

In attempting to avoid war at all costs (preferably others’ costs), British leaders had the support of a majority of parliament, the general public, and the Dominions. If there were “guilty men,” at least initially, the whole nation was their accomplice. Other scholars have been more critical. Frank McDonough, for example, notes that Neville Chamberlain’s government strove mightily to shape, even manufacture, public opinion in support of its foreign policies.⁵ Hence, even though, by 1938, public opinion had grown hostile to Nazi Germany, a bare majority still approved of the Munich agreement.

French leaders were somewhat more realistic in appraising Hitler’s intentions, but, given France’s economic and demographic inferiority to Germany, its statesmen felt compelled to tailor their policies to British preferences. In regard to the Sudeten crisis of 1938, Steiner judges that French Premier Edouard Daladier “wanted it both ways, to maintain the alliance with Czechoslovakia but keep close to Britain, for he knew that France was in no position to meet its obligations except in partnership with the British” (566). The French felt constrained in every dimension of national power—their society was fractured, their politics fractious, and their industry seemingly unequal to the challenge of an arms race with Germany: “there was no possibility of leading a united country to war in 1938” (602). The only thing all Frenchmen could agree on was that another war like that of 1914–18 would ruin the nation.

Steiner pays close attention to the economic underpinnings of Anglo-French foreign policies. London and Paris still tried to assert their influence in Europe and globally even after their economic strength had been substantially eroded. Thus, for example, France’s efforts to keep Romania and Yugoslavia within its camp were materially hindered by an inability to match Nazi Germany’s support for eastern European markets. High unemployment, a negative balance of trade, and the continuing decline of the pound sterling badly hampered British foreign and military policies. If the country’s financial health was its “fourth arm of defense,” then the high costs of rapid rearmament in support of a more robust foreign policy might be self-defeating. French leaders were similarly constrained by their government’s chronic financial crisis. But, in some cases, economic “facts” merely buttressed preexisting political illusions. Chamberlain’s conviction that diplomacy could forestall war trumped purely fiscal considerations in the higher spending priority given RAF Fighter Command over Bomber Command, which meant the forgoing of a weapons system with significant offensive and deterrent capabilities.

Steiner sees the Abyssinian crisis (1935–36) as the tipping point in continental affairs. Anglo-French leaders opposed Italian conquest just enough to quell public outrage at home (and drive Mussolini toward an alliance with Hitler), but not enough to actually save Ethiopia. The resulting fiasco undermined the League of Nations, destroyed confidence in the principle of collective security, and began to alter the European balance of power. It also doomed Italy.

Benito Mussolini’s dreams of a renewed Roman Empire ensnared him and his nation in an ultimately fatal partnership with the Third Reich. In the 1920s, his Fascist regime had mastered the theatrics of myth and spectacle in dominating the Italian polity. Now, a decade later, make-believe veiled unpalatable reality in matters of state. Il Duce’s armed services chiefs, who certainly knew better, assured him that Italy could fight Britain and France for mastery of the Mediterranean. Moreover, though he had publically condemned anti-Semitism as a crude prejudice and privately disparaged Hitler as a fanatic, Mussolini now embraced

5. *Neville Chamberlain: Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester: Manchester U Pr, 1998) 127–30, 159–60.

“Aryan” racism, not under pressure from Berlin, but to stimulate a “spiritual revolution” among the Italian people.

Franklin Roosevelt does not fare well here either. Historians, including this reviewer, have credited FDR with a clear grasp of the Axis threat to US security; though he sought to respond appropriately to this menace, he was severely inhibited by an ardently isolationist Congress and electorate. In contrast, Steiner finds the American president indecisive, ineffective, and disingenuous: “neither the British nor the French could place too much faith in American backing or on the fulfilment of the bulk of the president’s promises. Their caution proved well-judged” (819). She admits, but undervalues, the fact that Roosevelt’s ineffectual appeals to the dictators were designed to educate the American citizenry and sway public opinion toward intervention.

Among several themes in the book concerning the relations of the Western Powers is the persistent distrust and animosity between British and French leaders. Although, at one level, each side knew it very much needed the other, neither London nor Paris had any real confidence in its cross-channel partner. British leaders, time and again, excused their own timidity and inaction on the grounds that France would never stand with them, whatever their pledges of support. By 1938, “Britain was militarily isolating herself from the continent” (604). The decision to ramp up production of interceptor aircraft rather than bombers demonstrates this shift. A strengthened Fighter Command was to ensure the defense of the home islands. For their part, cynical Frenchmen were right to suspect that “perfidious Albion” would betray them. This self-defeating pattern of mutual mistrust persisted well into the war years, with disastrous results for France in 1940.⁶

Another leitmotif is the Western Powers’ diplomacy of weakness. The British and French repeatedly ignored German and Italian treaty violations and outright aggression, in part because they believed themselves to be weaker than their opponents. Though the military capacities of both France and Great Britain were in fact overstretched by the defense requirements of their global empires, the Western Powers constantly underestimated their strength while grossly exaggerating Axis military power. Thus, British and French leaders feared the Ethiopian crisis might spark a war with Italy that could expand to include Germany as well. But why was France so intimidated, when its own armed strength in 1936 exceeded that of Germany and Italy combined? At bottom, before 1939, neither British nor French leaders were at all willing to risk confronting Hitler. Each side rationalized its inaction by blaming the supposed weakness and unreliability of its principal ally. Most importantly, the pusillanimous behavior of London and Paris only encouraged Hitler to become more aggressive. I wish Steiner had investigated further the psychology underlying such misperceptions and timidity.

Yet another ongoing problem was the propensity of British leaders to assume that, beneath the hysterical and bellicose rhetoric, there was a more sensible Hitler, more rational, more concerned with the welfare of his people, in short, more like themselves. For example, “The [British] government’s high sensitivity to its own domestic financial and commercial concerns led to the belief that Hitler would also be influenced by the difficulties he faced in these domains” (305). Surely he would see that the greatly accelerated rearmament campaign he had initiated was bankrupting Germany. British leaders discounted the dictator’s ideological rantings as mere oratorical excess and trusted that, in the end, the responsibilities of governance would determine his priorities. Too many Western statesmen assumed Hitler was just a cruder version of his Weimar predecessors, failing to realize that his complaints about the supposed inequities of the Versailles system were a tactic skillfully used to undermine that system and establish German hegemony. Hitler was not just a rougher version of Chancellor Gustav Stresemann.

The assumption that economic rationality would eventually prevail in Berlin died hard. Chamberlain and his foreign trade advisors still thought, in early 1939, that the financial trauma caused by hyper-rapid rearmament and an aggressive foreign policy would force Hitler to curtail the arms race, abandon autarchy,

6. See Jeffery A. Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat in the West, 1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1979).

and cooperate with the Western Powers: “even in August [1939] ... [Chamberlain] still did not regard Germany as an implacable enemy that had to be fought and defeated” (1033).

Steiner astutely points out that, from a balance of power perspective, an alliance between Britain, France, and the Soviet Union to contain the looming German threat in the 1930s would have made eminently good sense. The example of the growing menace to both Western and Soviet interests posed by Japanese expansionism in the Far East should have made that obvious. After 1933, Moscow sought just such an arrangement, but London and Paris spurned its entreaties. Their reasons were visceral anti-communism, revulsion at the brutal Soviet regime, and doubts about the effectiveness of the Red Army (especially after the Great Purges), combined with Chamberlain’s belief that Hitler could be appeased and that a new Triple Entente would make war more, not less, likely. Even those British officials who recognized most clearly the growing danger of German belligerence and the futility of appeasing Hitler, like Foreign Office permanent under-secretary Robert Vansittart, doubted the reliability of the USSR as an ally of the Western Powers. The geographic position of France should have mandated an alliance with the Soviet Union even more than one with Britain, but a great many French leaders disliked and distrusted Moscow as much as the British did. Even those in Paris who understood the value of a mutual defense pact with Russia, such as Leon Blum, ultimately acquiesced in the British veto of any such tie.

The German seizure of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, violating the (1938) Munich agreement just six months after its signing, shocked the Western Powers and finally moved them to open negotiations with the USSR. London and Paris, however, envisioned the Soviet Union mainly as a supply base for the Polish army and any active involvement of the Red Army as dependent on the invitation of its eastern European neighbors. Further, they wanted the USSR to guarantee the sovereignty of the states on its western border. Such a circumscribed role for the Soviet Union was unacceptable to Stalin, who insisted on a carefully delineated, completely binding military alliance with Britain and France. Steiner identifies significantly different objectives as the chief barrier to East-West cooperation at this point. The Anglo-French side hoped that negotiations with the USSR would deter Hitler from going to war, while the Soviets were seeking conditions that might ensure victory in the unavoidable war they foresaw. She also suggests that, after the Western “guarantee” of Poland, “It was in the Soviet interest to stay in its nonaligned position as long as possible” (885). Unfortunately, Stalin reciprocated Chamberlain’s dislike and extreme distrust of the USSR. He feared that the liberal-democratic states desired a Nazi-Soviet war that would devastate both sides.

Steiner rejects the argument of some leading historians⁷ that Stalin much preferred an arrangement with Hitler to an alliance with the democracies and that he wanted to provoke an intra-imperialist war that would promote revolution and/or Soviet expansionism. Instead, she portrays him in summer 1939 as mistrustful of everyone and unsure which path to follow—neutrality and isolation, alliance with the West, or a deal with Hitler. “Stalin’s main interest at the time was in the security of the Soviet Union and neither in its revolutionary nor territorial expansion” (910). Unlike the self-deluded Chamberlain, who thought Hitler could be satisfied by diplomatic concessions, Stalin knew for certain (from German documents obtained by Soviet intelligence agents) that the German leader meant to destroy the USSR. Therefore, either isolation or a partnership with the Third Reich could only be a temporary expedient. For these reasons, Moscow demanded an ironclad, war-fighting alliance from its prospective Western partners. The Russians also expected the Western Powers to pressure Poland to permit the transit of the Red Army across its territory. The British absolutely rejected such commitments. The French, increasingly desperate for a credible eastern front, promised such an alliance only if England joined it, too. Western strategic planning is crucial in this context. Though Steiner mentions that the British and French expected a long war of attrition and intended to fight only on the defensive at first, she does not explore Western war planning in detail or address the failure of the British-French-Soviet military negotiations in Moscow in August 1939. London and Paris

7. See, e.g., Gerhard L. Weinberg, *World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II* (Lebanon, NH: U Pr of New England, 1981); Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1939* (NY: Norton, 1990); Richard C. Raack, *Stalin’s Drive to the West, 1938–1945* (Stanford: Stanford U Pr, 1995); and Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1996).

lacked both the will and (so they thought) the capability to be the fully engaged allies that Stalin required.⁸ The Western Powers were simply not alliance-worthy from the Kremlin's perspective.

Russian and Western historians have denounced Stalin's decision to abandon the fruitless military talks with Britain and France and to sign the infamous Nazi-Soviet Pact. Steiner, in contrast, defends these decisions as the best among the dangerous options available to Moscow. "On a purely pragmatic and *realpolitik* grounds, the German terms offered the USSR a greater measure of security than the western offers. It allowed the Soviet Union to remain neutral and held out the promise of a more protected position in Poland and the Baltic. The USSR would win a breathing space in Europe as well as in the Far East" (913).

The book also includes a chapter on the policies and actions of the small powers—Ireland, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. For most of them, their own weakness and the inability of the Western Powers to offer them significant assistance mandated neutrality. German pressure, economic necessities, and irredentist ambitions drove some of them to cooperate with the Third Reich. Steiner also clarifies the international ramifications of Germany's persecution of its Jews in the prewar period. *Kristallnacht* and other atrocities caused growing condemnation abroad, but no significant aid for the victims. The desire to avoid conflict with the rapidly rearming Reich, widespread anti-Semitism abroad, and depression-era conditions meant that few countries took steps to protect Jewish Germans or offer them asylum. For the refugees, the door was open only in the Dominican Republic and Shanghai.

Steiner also considers the response of "ordinary Germans" to the Nazis' extreme anti-Semitic measures. "But whether because of traditional anti-Semitism, the fierce and constant daily indoctrination, ingrained habits of obedience, or fear, the majority of Germans on the eve of the war, appear to have been indifferent, if not assenting, or enthusiastic, about the Reich's treatment of the Jews.... [T]he vast majority appear to have accepted the Nazi racial programme without protest" (981).

The Triumph of the Dark retells a well-known story, but in much greater detail, in the process correcting many misconceptions in the historiography of the Second World War. Steiner has done meticulous research in British and French archives and in the documentary collections of all the European powers, the United States, and the League of Nations. She has also consulted many personal memoirs and drawn insights from the prodigious secondary literature of her subject. Readers wishing to pursue specific topics will find the detailed and up-to-date chapter bibliographies invaluable. Her book is a stunning achievement and an indispensable resource for anyone seriously interested in the origins of World War II.

8. See Teddy J. Uldricks, "The Impossible Alliance: Strategy and Reliability in the Triple Entente Negotiations of 1939," in Melissa Yeager and Charles Carter, eds., *Pacts and Alliances in History* (London: I.B.Taurus, 2012) 154–69.