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978-0-521-85254-8 - Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders

Gerhard L. Weinberg

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

DURING WORLD WAR II THE LEADERS OF THE MAJOR BELLIGERENTS concentrated their attention and their energies on the immediate requirements of the fighting; but not only did they from time to time give some thought to the postwar world that might emerge at the end of the war – assuming that their side won – but also the very decisions they made were frequently affected by the hopes and aspirations they entertained about that future. The war was, after all, not fought because countries had large armed forces and did not know what to do with them. The belligerents fought for aims, however vaguely defined; and even those who found themselves attacked, and hence involved in hostilities against their own prior preference, either already had or developed concepts of what the postwar world should be like when the fighting ended.

The course of events, the changing fortunes of battle, the entrance or departure of powers from the conflict, and revisions in the understanding of events would from time to time produce changes in perceptions of a desirable future. These changes could in turn influence policies and military deployments and allocations and in other ways affect the course of hostilities. While the public in each country might have a variety of views and aspirations, fears and hopes,

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about the future, the focus of this study is on the leaders of eight major belligerents. Because of the short periods of time that they led their countries during the war, Neville Chamberlain, Clement Attlee, Harry Truman, Koiso Kuniaki, and Suzuki Kantaro will not be discussed.¹ The subjects of scrutiny are, in order, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Tojo Hideki on the Axis side, Chiang Kai-shek, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, and Franklin Roosevelt on the Allied side. The leaders of the countries that took the initiative in starting the war are placed first, in the sequence in which they came to be involved in open hostilities, followed by the Allied leaders in the sequence in which they came to be involved.

In each case an effort based on the often fragmentary evidence is made to show what the hopes and ambitions of each of these major actors were, and also whether and why and in which direction their views appear to have changed during the war. In many cases there will necessarily be a speculative element in the presentation; and not only might alternative readings of the currently available evidence be possible, but also new evidence may yet come to light. It is, however, worthwhile to look beyond the course of hostilities and to examine the aspirations of those in charge of the main belligerents. This procedure will assist us in understanding the choices and decisions those leaders made at the time and also provides some basis for assessing the extent to which the subsequent course of events was affected by their decisions. It will hopefully also help to show how developments during as well as after the war came to confound their hopes or conform to their expectations.

In examining the thinking and planning of these leaders, the reader who knows how the war developed and especially how it ended must always be extremely careful not to project that

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knowledge backwards. At the time, the men who led their nations in the greatest war ever fought had their hopes as well as military plans that might lead to the realization of those hopes; but however clear their understanding of the current situation in the conflict, they had no way of knowing for certain how it would all come out. It is fair to say that each had a substantial degree of confidence in an outcome that would be favorable to the country that he was leading. Hitler was not prepared to admit that Germany was about to be defeated until the late spring of 1945. Mussolini started to have serious doubts by the end of 1942 and therefore began to urge his German associate to make a separate peace with the Soviet Union. Tojo may well have had doubts about the outcome of the war at some point before his dismissal over the Japanese defeat in the Marianas in July 1944. Whatever disastrous defeats Britain suffered, Churchill was always confident that victory would come, however many years it might take. The prior experience of England in the wars against Philip II of Spain, Louis XIV and Napoleon of France, and also in World War I affected a man who was very conscious of history – and had written much history himself. De Gaulle was similarly confident that sooner or later victory for the Allies would include a France freed from German control and restored in full glory to the status of a major power in the world.

Stalin, during the fall of 1941, again in 1942 and well into 1943, was probably the one leader on the Allied side who at times had doubts and fears about the possibility of defeat or at least such exhaustion as to weaken his country in the trials that he was certain lay ahead. The example of Lenin's willingness to make enormous concessions to Germany in order to retain control of the bulk of the country in early 1918 was always there for him. It was concern about the possibility of loss of control in the first part of the war on the

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Eastern Front – together with the subsequent realization, after the German recovery following the great Soviet victory at Stalingrad, that the road to Berlin would be a terribly costly one – that inclined Stalin alone to give serious thought to a compromise peace with Germany, a possibility that Hitler invariably rejected.²

Chiang Kai-shek, after the rejection of any mediated peace by the Japanese government in early 1938, was determined to fight the Japanese invaders until they tired of an endless conflict. After December 1941 he was sure that American participation in the war against Japan in effect guaranteed victory. Roosevelt was always certain that the Allies could and would crush the Axis powers and was no more dissuaded from this view by the early major American defeats than was Churchill. Whatever the confidence or lack of it, whatever the timing of changed perspectives, all the leaders on both sides knew that until the last shot was fired, the clash of arms, the solidity of the home front, and the elements of uncertainty and contingency would dominate events.

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I. Adolf Hitler

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Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and General Field Marshall Keitel looking at map (ca. 1942). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-116157.

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BORN INTO THE FAMILY OF AN AUSTRIAN CUSTOMS OFFICIAL in 1889, Adolf Hitler had moved to Munich as a young man and served in a Bavarian unit of the German army on the Western Front in World War I. After the war he was briefly assigned to give indoctrination lectures to soldiers and then to observe a small new political party in Munich, which he soon joined and came to dominate. A failed coup attempt in 1923 brought him a short time in jail but also his first national publicity. After his release, he devoted himself to building up the National Socialist German Workers Party. A temporary alliance with the extremist German Nationalist Party gave him the opportunity to bring his message to large numbers of Germans, and by the beginning of the 1930s his party was the largest in the country. A small group of individuals around the president of Germany, Paul von Hindenburg, persuaded the latter to appoint Hitler chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Over the subsequent year and a half, Hitler succeeded in consolidating his hold on the country by ending all civil liberties, dissolving all other political parties, and establishing an effective police and terror apparatus.

In any review of Hitler's hopes and aims in World War II, two interrelated aspects of his thinking before he became chancellor of

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Germany must be noted. Already in the 1920s he was clear in his own mind that Germany deserved to conquer the globe and would be able to do so if only he were given the opportunity to lead it in the manner he thought appropriate – and his closest followers fully understood this concept.¹ In November 1930 he explained to the faculty and students of Erlangen University in a subsequently published speech that no people had more of a right to fight for and attain control of the globe (*Weltherrschaft*) than the Germans.²

Hitler was under no illusion that a goal that others might consider preposterous could be attained without a great deal of fighting. He recognized that this privately held and publicly proclaimed ambition would necessarily require a series of wars. This makes it more understandable why he explicitly asserted in the book he dictated in the summer of 1928 that each war Germany fought would merely provide the starting point for the next one in the series.³ Dictated after his party's very poor showing in the May 1928 election, this text, which was designed to reinforce the very views on foreign policy that he thought had cost his party votes, offers support for the increasingly accepted view that Hitler was a man driven by ideology rather than simply an opportunist seeking power.

It had been within the framework of a series of wars that he had decided in early May 1938 to attack Czechoslovakia that fall. The purpose of conquering Czechoslovakia was to strengthen Germany's strategic position in central Europe and also provide, through the utilization of the portion of the country's population that was of German cultural background, the opportunity to raise additional divisions for the German army to employ in the next war. Such potential reinforcement was especially important to Hitler because the second war in the series was the one he believed likely to be the most difficult, namely, the war against the Western powers, Great Britain

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and France.⁴ At the last moment Hitler changed his mind, called off that war, and settled at the Munich Conference for what others thought of as a German triumph but Hitler came to consider the worst mistake of his career. The “lesson” he derived from Munich was that no one was ever going to cheat him of war again, and in 1939 he so conducted German diplomacy and military preparations that there would be no possibility of a negotiated settlement.⁵ Since the Polish government, unlike those of Hungary and Lithuania, had not been willing to subordinate itself to Germany as the latter moved to initiate its war against France and Great Britain, Poland would be crushed first, with the two Western powers either attacked thereafter or in the same conflict if they supported Poland.

The war started by Germany on September 1, 1939, was therefore seen as the next in a series; it was to pave the way for a war against the Soviet Union, thereafter a war against the United States, and another to follow, as explained below. For a number of reasons growing out of the actual course of hostilities, the wars against the Soviet Union and the United States were initiated by Germany before the preceding one in the expected series had been finished, and therefore Hitler’s aims in this wider conflict are what must be examined.⁶ But before that can be done, something has to be said about the war that was expected to be next in the series.

Because Britain had not surrendered after the fall of France to the German invasion of that country in May and June of 1940, Hitler was most anxious for Japan to enter the war. That country could provide a great surface navy, and although Hitler had planned such a navy and the Germans had begun construction on it, they had not yet had the time to complete it. When the Japanese explained to their German ally that they could not attack the British base at Singapore without going to war with the United

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States to protect the flank of their advance south, Hitler personally promised Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke that in that case Germany would immediately join in war against the United States. He worried all during the negotiations between Japan and the United States in 1941 that an agreement might be reached between them, and he did what he could to encourage the Japanese to strike. Furthermore, to judge by recently published evidence, he had driven the German army forward toward Moscow in December 1941 in part for fear that the authorities in Tokyo might get cold feet at the last moment and not plunge into the wider war about which they had just asked Berlin and Rome for reassurance.⁷

The enthusiasm for Japan to enter the war, strike at the British base at Singapore, and assure Germany of the participation of a major navy on the side of the Axis did not, however, imply any great German fondness for that power. Relations between Berlin and Tokyo during their joint war against the Western powers were distant, and not only in miles. All the evidence points to the assumption that Hitler, just as he had been willing to make extensive concessions to the Soviet Union in 1939 to obtain its assistance until Germany was ready to move East, was willing to sign over to the Japanese whatever they wanted in order to get them into the war on his side until they in turn could be conquered in a subsequent war.⁸ Since Germany was defeated by the Allies rather than victorious, that subsequent war did not take place; and it is to the aims of the one that Germany began on September 1, 1939, that attention must be devoted.

It seems appropriate to examine first the territorial dimensions of the empire Hitler intended to take over for Germany as a result of the conflict he had been so insistent on starting before dealing with the developments he expected to bring about within that