

Following important events, historians, politicians and writers have a tendency to discuss and debate the causes and the origins of the events. Particularly traumatic events such as major conflicts and wars are often especially subject to historical scrutiny. Perhaps this is because people feel the need to explain the deaths of so many soldiers. There is also a tendency to seek to designate some individual or some country as responsible for the outbreak of the war and, by extension, the death and destruction that it caused. This is known as 'war guilt' and can be very controversial. Sometimes, these debates over the origins of a war and the guilt or innocence of those countries who participated in it are never settled definitively. We have seen this during our study of the July Crisis of 1914. The origin of the conflict which became known as the First World War can be debated to this day and there is no guarantee to reach a consensus. A.J.P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* was published in 1961 and discusses, as the title suggests, the author's views on how and why the Second World War started.

According to Taylor, there are several reasons why the Second World War broke out the way it did. These reasons are the geopolitical balance of power in Europe created by the Treaty of Versailles, the consequences of this new balance of power and Hitler's ambition to restore Germany to what he perceived to be its rightful place on the European and world stages. In this paper I will discuss these reasons and I will discuss how contemporary and present-day scholars reacted to Taylor's argument. He bases his argument around a number of diplomatic and foreign policy documents relating usually to France, Britain and, obviously, Germany. His argument also features some logical assumptions about the unfolding of events. I believe it is important to note that Taylor makes it clear in the foreword that he is not interested in the 'war guilt' concept and placing blame on anyone or any nation. Rather, Taylor seeks to explain why and how the events which followed November 1918 and preceded September 1939, led to war.

Fundamentally, the origin of the Second World War can be simplified to a conflict over whether or not the geopolitical circumstances of Europe which were created as a result of the Treaty of Versailles should continue to exist.¹ Obviously, there are much more complex issues at stake in the lead up to the Second World War such as the place of the German nation on the European and world stages. The Treaty of Versailles destroyed the German Empire in more ways than one. Obviously, the German state was transformed from a monarchy to a republic. However, the change extends beyond the government. Germany was also forced to concede all of her overseas colonies as a part of this treaty. Lastly, Germany lost some of its land in Europe including the important port city of Danzig. Germany was also subject to certain important limitations when it came to her armed forces. Germany lost much of her fleet and the size of her army was restricted and heavily reduced. These impediments to the German nation made her appear weak when compared to Britain and France who still had overseas colonies and fleets. Despite the apparent weakness of Germany, she was still very powerful in Europe. As we have seen in the Gerhard Weinberg reading, the Germany which emerged from the First World War still had a large population and was highly industrialized.² Taylor is well aware of this fact³ and he is also aware of the fact that, eventually, this would allow Germany to rise again.⁴

From the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second World War, “the place of Germany (...) was in dispute.”⁵ In other words, Germany’s place as a world power was

¹ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 1/34, chapter 2, Kobo.

² Gerhard L. Weinberg, “The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power,” in *Germany, Hitler and World War II*, ed. Gerhard L. Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19.

³ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 9/34, chapter 2.

⁴ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 11/34, chapter 2.

⁵ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 5/16, chapter 1.

in question but it was never truly a second rate power in Europe or in the world. The previously mentioned impediments to German power, along with the demand for reparations because of alleged German war-guilt made the Versailles Treaty highly resented in Germany.⁶ The German resentment towards the Treaty of Versailles, combined with the potential strength of the nation, led to a strong desire to either revise it or ignore it altogether. Taylor points out that the victorious allies of the First World War were either unwilling or unable to enforce the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles.⁷

Taylor suggests that one of Hitler's desires, among others, was to "free Germany from the restrictions of the peace treaty"⁸ and to "make Germany the greatest power in Europe."⁹ As has already been established, Germany would eventually be in a position to rise again. To do so, he would have to violate the Treaty of Versailles that was preventing Germany from reaching the contemporary markers of a powerful nation. These include a powerful army and navy among others. This being the case, and with Germany's ability to pose a significant threat once it recovered, Britain and France would, sooner or later, be placed in a situation where they had to risk war to enforce the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles. The Second World War was an attempt at resolving the issue of Germany's place among the world powers by force of arms.

One of the most entrenched and generally accepted causes for the outbreak of the Second World War is Hitler. One important reason why this explanation is so common is because it is popular with all parties. Logically, placing the blame, or the war guilt, on one individual exonerates other individuals of guilt. This is appealing to the German people, who willingly or

⁶ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 5/32, chapter 3.

⁷ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 11/34, chapter 2.

⁸ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 13/40, chapter 4.

⁹ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 13/40, chapter 4.

not, followed Hitler into war, as well as the Western Allies, who failed to stop Hitler before war broke out. In his examination of the causes of the Second World War, Taylor goes against this commonly accepted claim. In fact, Taylor claims that Hitler did not have any carefully prepared plan to conquer Europe.¹⁰ This implies that Hitler was more of an opportunist, someone who took advantages of geopolitical circumstances as they presented themselves. As an example, Taylor points to the Reichstag fire, which was used as the justification to strengthen Hitler and the Nazi party's power in Germany. As has already been discussed, Hitler's goals for Germany was to restore her to what he believed to be her rightful place, as the biggest European power.¹¹ However, Taylor writes that Hitler was not in the habit of being the driving force behind such aggressive foreign policy goals, and that he "waited for the inner weakening of the European system".¹² Another example of this is the German Non-Aggression Pact signed with Poland. Despite the strong desire to remove the Polish Corridor, as evidenced by the German ultimatum to Poland in 1939, Hitler was happy to sign a Non-Aggression Pact with Poland and be patient.¹³

Walther Hoper reviewed Taylor's book and had quite harsh criticism for it. It is worth noting, as Hoper points out in his review, that he published a book with the exact opposite thesis to Taylor.¹⁴ Hoper does acknowledge the legitimacy of proposing and defending an opposing thesis in the name of historiography but he is critical of the way in which Taylor does it.¹⁵ This is the only remotely positive thing Hoper has to say about Taylor's work. For the rest of the

¹⁰ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 7/28, foreword.

¹¹ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 13/40, chapter 4.

¹² Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 11/46, chapter 6.

¹³ Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, 11/46, chapter 6.

¹⁴ Walther Hoper, *International Journal* 18, no. 1 (Winter, 1962/1963): 120.

¹⁵ Hoper, 120.

review, Hoper criticizes Taylor's use and interpretation of sources.¹⁶ Hoper describes Taylor's work as "very unacademic" and his arguments as untruthful.¹⁷ Hoper ends his review by saying that Taylor has become a victim of Nazi propaganda.¹⁸ Hoper very obviously disagrees with Taylor's thesis on multiple level and his review of Taylor's work sometimes borders on an attack on Taylor's character and reputation, as evidenced by his closing remarks.

Harry Elmer Barnes' review of Taylor's book was published in 1962 and is considerably less aggressive than Hoper's review. Barnes points out the lack of scholarly works discussing the origins of the Second World War, compared to the wealth of information which had been published in the aftermath of the First World War.¹⁹ Barnes' review of Taylor's thesis criticizes the omission of sources and material.²⁰ Barnes concludes his review by claiming that the most important consequence of the publishing of Taylor's book is that it received attention and may lead to more discussion about the history of the origins of the Second World War.²¹ Overall, Barnes' review was much more balanced than Hoper's though he still clearly expressed his criticism of Taylor's methods.

Gordon Martel provides a collection of essays by specialists and historians to analyze Taylor's book and provide their own opinion on his argument. In his essay *The End of Versailles*, Stephen Schuker describes Taylor's work as inconsistent.²² He points out instances

¹⁶ Hoper, 120.

¹⁷ Hoper, 120.

¹⁸ Hoper, 121.

¹⁹ Harry Elmer Barnes, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 341, (May 1962): 124.

²⁰ Barnes, 124.

²¹ Barnes, 124.

²² Stephen A. Schuker, "The End of Versailles," in *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*, ed. Gordon Martel, (London: Routledge, 1999), 40.

where Taylor contradicts his own arguments. For example, Taylor contradicts himself with regards to the conflict between France and Germany saying on the one hand that the conflict would continue, and on the other that the Treaty of Versailles would be gradually revised.²³ Schuker also criticizes Taylor for failing to adequately express the importance of reparations, especially to the victorious allies who would have benefitted from the funds and the natural resources the reparations would have provided them.²⁴ Schuker does say that Taylor correctly identifies the primary geopolitical issues of the time, namely German reparations to the victors of the First World War and security in the post-war world.²⁵ On the whole Schuker is rather critical of Taylor's book. He especially disagrees with a number of the conclusions Taylor draws from world events.

Richard Overy also presents his opinion of Taylor's book in his essay *Misjudging Hitler*. Overy has a number of positive things to say about Taylor's argument. He agrees with Taylor's assessment of Hitler and his policy as a continuation of previous German statesmen's goals, especially with regard to the unity of all ethnic Germans, the pursuit of living space and the pursuit of *Weltpolitik*.²⁶ He also acknowledges that Taylor was correct in his conclusion that Hitler was one of many who participated in foreign policy in the years leading up to the war and he also was not the singular driving force behind it.²⁷ Overy also supports Taylor's assertion that Hitler took advantage of the geopolitical situation as it was unfolding before him.²⁸ Overy points to Hitler's belief that the British and French would not defend Poland as proof of this claim.²⁹

²³ Schuker, "The End of Versailles," 41.

²⁴ Schuker, "The End of Versailles," 45.

²⁵ Schuker, "The End of Versailles," 42.

²⁶ Richard Overy, "Misjudging Hitler: A.J.P. Taylor and the Third Reich," in *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*, ed. Gordon Martel (London: Routledge, 1999), 94.

²⁷ Overy, "Misjudging Hitler," 95.

²⁸ Overy, "Misjudging Hitler," 97.

²⁹ Overy, "Misjudging Hitler," 97.

Overy reaffirms this belief when he states that Hitler had “no blueprints for aggression”.³⁰ On the other hand, Overy states that Taylor’s argument with regard to Germany’s domestic policy is weak.³¹ He also suggests that Taylor either ignored or downplayed certain evidence which might have opposed his argument.³²

Lastly, Teddy Uldricks also contributed an essay to Gordon Martel’s book. Uldricks disagrees with Taylor’s negligence to consider the role of the Soviet Union.³³ Uldricks describes Taylor’s writing regarding diplomatic relations between Britain and the Soviet Union as “relatively thorough and insightful”.³⁴ Uldricks is very critical of Taylor’s failure accord the proper importance to Hitler’s ideas.³⁵ It must be said that Taylor had a tendency to down play them and did not take them seriously. He is also critical of Taylor for his failure to recognize the importance of political ideological differences and their role on international relations.³⁶

These reviews, as well as the earlier reviews, seem to agree that Taylor either downplayed or ignored important evidence. However, the modern reviews seem to be relatively open to considering Taylor’s thesis, especially with regards to Hitler not being the mastermind behind the Second World War. This is a great contrast from Hoper’s review.

As Morton has said, I find Taylor’s argument to be well articulated and convincing. It is certainly interesting to consider an argument which opposes the strongly entrenched common

³⁰ Overy, “Misjudging Hitler,” 103.

³¹ Overy, “Misjudging Hitler,” 98.

³² Overy, “Misjudging Hitler,” 104.

³³ Teddy J. Uldricks, “Debating the Role of Russia in the Origins of the Second World War,” in *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered*, ed. Gordon Martel (London: Routledge, 1999), 135.

³⁴ Uldricks, “Debating the Role of Russia in the Origins of the Second World War,” 137.

³⁵ Uldricks, “Debating the Role of Russia in the Origins of the Second World War,” 138.

³⁶ Uldricks, “Debating the Role of Russia in the Origins of the Second World War,” 149.

understanding that the origin of the Second World War lies entirely with Hitler. I believe that some of Taylor's arguments, while interesting to consider and well presented, should be subject to scrutiny because of the severity of the issue at hand. For example, Taylor's claim that Hitler did not plan his takeover of Europe and that events simply lined up to allow him to do so is questionable. Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, does show the reader and any historian his plans for Germany and for Europe. While I believe it can be argued convincingly that Hitler had not planned and did not know how to achieve the goals he describes, the fact remains that he had these goals. In other words, events might not have unfolded according to a timeline that he had prepared but, as Overy states "it was not mere historical accident that found him trying to remodel the world order".³⁷ Therefore, while Taylor makes a strong case for Hitler not being solely responsible for the outbreak of the war, I believe he does not give enough importance to Hitler's clearly stated goals and often diminishes their significance as many statesmen did before the outbreak of the war and the news of the Holocaust. It is no light task to alleviate Hitler and the Nazis of some of the blame for the human disaster that is the Second World War, and by extension the Holocaust. That being said, for the sake of historical accuracy and in an effort to accurately attribute war-guilt to those responsible, no stone should be left unturned and every possibility should be considered.

³⁷ Overy, "Misjudging Hitler," 111.

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