

WORLD WAR 2 AT 70

Recollections of a man of German descent

by Gerhard A. Fuerst

We passed the 70th anniversary of WWII last week without any comments (on this Forum) about the most momentous war of the 20th century which cost the lives of 55 million people and made 30 million people refugees. Below is a short account of the foreign provocations of Nazi Germany which led to the war.

Account of Major Events of the War, European Theater

World War two began on the morning of 1 September 2009, when the armies of Nazi Germany mounted unprovoked assault upon Poland from three different directions, with 100 hundred divisions of the army. In this article, I will focus upon the attacks upon foreign sovereignty by Germany.

Right from the beginning of Hitler's reign in January 1933, the assault was upon the liberties, civil rights and dignity of the German people. The six year's record is of arbitrary exercise of power, persecution of Jews, violation of democracy and human rights. These breaches will be detailed in a second article.

The focus in this first article is on his assault upon neighboring countries, which precipitated the Second World War. This is a short account, in which the complexities have not been stated, in the interest of brevity.

March 1936 – Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland region of Germany, on the borders with France, against the terms of Treaty of Versailles, which was signed at the end of World War One. Britain and France did nothing, which gave a clue to Hitler that there was no stomach for war on their part.

Austria

Hitler's first move, made within months after he came to power in 1933, was to launch a campaign to absorb his native Austria into a Greater Germany – an objective recorded on the very first page of his book Mein Kampf. He sent secret agents into Austria. The agents had a ready-made weapon at their disposal: hundreds of thousands of Austrian Nazis, who wanted what they called Anschluss, political union with Germany.

Austria's Chancellor, Engleberet Dollfuss would have none of this. He outlawed both its Nazi and Socialist parties and setting up an authoritarian regime on the model of Mussolini's Italy. In July 1934 a bomb wrecked a power station and paralyzed Vienna's transport. Chancellor Dolfuss issued an ultimatum: a death sentence awaited any Nazi who was caught with explosives.

A few days later, when the Chancellor was having a cabinet meeting, 10 men burst in, pistols in hand, dressed in uniforms of Austria's army. One gunman shot Dollfuss in the chest and neck; two others dumped him, bleeding, on a sofa. The Austrian cabinet members were seized as hostages while the Nazis occupied the building for six hours. Meanwhile, Dolfuss slowly bled to death. At that moment, the drama took a surprising twist. Minister of Education Kurt von Schuschnigg had left the cabinet for an early luncheon. He directed Austrian troops to lay siege to the Chancellery. The gunman were promptly hanged and the plot collapsed.

In the summer of 1938, Hitler annexed Austria.

Czechoslovakia

In 1938 he staked claim to the German-speaking Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia, comprising most of that country's defences and much of industry.

The Soviet Union and France had a defence pact with Czechoslovakia, which they were not inclined to honour if attacked by Germany. Although this had nothing to do with Britain, the British premier Neville Chamberlain offered to mediate. He flew to Germany. The first talks were held on 22 September 1939 at Godesberg and they broke down. Hitler gave Britain and France an ultimatum of 2 pm on 28 September, after which he said he would invade Czechoslovakia. Mussolini, the dictator of Italy, then stepped in and proposed a 4-power conference. The Russians, who had guaranteed the sovereignty of Czechoslovakia and the Czechs were not invited.

Neville Chamberlain flew to Munich and the Munich Agreement was signed on 29 September 1938. It was signed by Chamberlain (Britain), Daladier (France), Hitler and Mussolini (Italy). The Sudetenland went to Germany. The Agreement stipulated that the Czech army would pull back from the 'German' areas of Czechoslovakia by 10 October 1939. On the surface, it was NOT a total climb-down. An 'International Commission' was to oversee the occupation, and plebiscites were to be held in areas of mixed race. The Agreement guaranteed the boundaries of the new Czecho-Slovakia, and Britain and France promised to support Czecho-Slovakia against future attack.

Neville Chamberlain returned to London and waved a piece of paper which he said Hitler had signed, declaring he had no more territorial claims. 'Peace in our time', said Neville Chamberlain. In fact, privately, the day before, Hitler and Mussolini had agreed that they would have to fight 'side by side' against France and Britain – who Hitler called, after Munich, 'the little worms'.

When the Czechoslovak government collapsed in March 1939, Hitler in effect annexed most of the remaining part of the country, marching his troops into Prague on 15 March and declaring a protectorate over the rump state of Slovakia. Britain and France did not honour their agreement to defend the country.

Poland

In response to the rape of Czecho-Slovakia and the occupation of Austria, on 31 March 1939, Britain made a defence pact with Poland, pledging intervention of her armed forces in the event of a German invasion. This was impractical, since Poland was far from Britain and could not send her army directly to that country.

On 22 March 1939, Hitler annexed Memel, a German-speaking enclave in Lithuania.

Pact with Soviet Union

Stalin was worried about Hitler's encirclement. He desperately sent messages to Britain to begin high-level negotiations to counter this threat. Instead of responding to this overture and commencing negotiations, which was the right thing to do, Britain sent a low level Foreign Office functionary to Moscow, who had no negotiating powers. On 23 August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact, which is commonly referred to as Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

In a secret clause to their treaty, Germany and Russia agreed to partition Poland, the Russian share being the territory in the east (over one-third of the country's area) which the Poles had snatched from Russia after World War One. Poland had been partitioned

twice in the previous two centuries by Germany and Russia. After the First World War it had a brief period as an independent country.

War with Poland

The Nazis launched a new style of warfare—blitzkrieg, or `lightening war. Stuka dive bombers strafed Polish airfields, wiping out most of her puny obsolete air force on the ground within the first 48 hours. From Pomerania, Silesia, East Prussia and Slovakia the Panzer divisions thrust into Poland, fanning out in three directions. Within just over a week Warsaw was surrounded and most of Poland was already in German hands. The era of total war had begun, and Warsaw was the first to feel its sting. The city held out valiantly until the 27th.

On 17 September Soviet troops, at a cost of less than a thousand lives, moved into the remainder of what had been the Polish state.

In June 1941 Hitler attacked the Soviet Union; in December 1941 Japan attacked USA at Pearl Harbor. The ensuing years of the war ended in May 1945 with the unconditional surrender of Germany. Japan surrendered in September 1945 after two atomic bombs were dropped.

Memories of a German boy caught up in madness...

Well, perhaps as the only (?) person of German descent in this august e-mail forum, I ought to begin the discussion of this particular topic.

I was born in 1936 in Bayreuth, the regional administrative capital of Upper Franconia, a province in the northern part of Bavaria, more known perhaps for the annual Richard Wagner Opera Festivals than anything else. Now, however, Bayreuth has also a university with a solid academic reputation. When the war ended, I was nine years old. In the interim, I had experienced the horror and trauma of a very bewildering and most tragic and convulsive time. Mine, of course, is the recollection of childhood which is, however, because of its intensity, still very vivid, to the point where at times I have nightmarish dreams.

I recall the tense times in Bayreuth, where politically motivated announcements and speeches were broadcast by loudspeakers all over town, and often people had their personal identification checked by the police and the military at sidewalk checkpoints. Bayreuth came under attack by bombing air raids. I still recall the flames in the dead of night, when we were awakened by the howling and wailing sound of air raid sirens.

We relocated to a small Central Franconian town of Feuchtwangen, where my paternal grandparents lived, in the hopes of a calmer time. There was none to be had anywhere. The fathers and adult sons of most families had been drafted and inducted into the armed forces of the country, and we listened to the news from the fighting fronts via a strange contraption called a Volksempfänger (a people's radio receiver), deliberately designed to focus attention on German news, and attempting to block out foreign media influence.

Despite all the flag waving, the bands playing of military marching music, the singing of patriotic songs, and all the shouting and saluting at public events, even a small child gained the impression that not all was well. I was always left with a feeling of unease and insecurity.

In elementary school, my first grade teacher was a devoted party member and spent much time on efforts of political indoctrination rather than on real education. Our school principal was a party member, and he gave what for us children were exhaustingly long and boring (supposedly patriotic) speeches, while we had to stand at attention and in formation, often in the heat of the summer sun, our little arms extended to give the now infamous salute.

I recall the public appeals to collect metals for recycling, to collect paper, to public appeals for warm clothing because the soldiers were cold...We went out into the fields to collect plants and herbs from which teas and medicines could be made. I recall the warnings issued through posters plastered everywhere that "Der Feind hoert mit!" (The enemies are listening in), suggesting that you could not really trust anyone.

I recall having to dodge bullets from the strafing runs of dive-bombers, by trying to hide in roadside ditches, in culverts, and behind trees, when we worked in farm fields, helping farmers to harvest their crops, to earn a few potatoes as pay, or a small sack of grain, which we took to a mill to exchange for an even smaller sack of flour.

The local brick factory and saw mill had a contingent of Russian POWs who worked there, and who were encamped in a set of barracks under minimal guard. One of them I befriended. He spoke a bit of German. He thought that I resembled and reminded him of his only son back in Russia. Many of the POWs were given permission to go to town to buy a few items on ration cards the way we had to shop as well for what little was available. One particular POW, assumed to be especially hard working, was assigned to a nearby farm, where for inexplicable reasons he killed the farmer's son (by cutting his throat), an elementary class mate of mine.

The POW ran off into the woods, but townspeople caught up with him and hung him from a tree. Another class mate of mine was helping his father plow a field to get it ready for spring cultivation. He was killed by dive bombing American planes. The team of horses was also shot and killed. A farm boy apparently was considered to be a justifiable military target.

I recall a train full of refugees, who had survived a bombing raid on the nearby city of Nuremberg being shot up and destroyed, killing all aboard. The train's cars had been marked with Red Cross insignia, but that did apparently not matter to the attackers. I witnessed the unloading of more than 200 dead women, children and elderly men from the charred remains of the train, which had been pulled back into our small town train station. To see that many dead people being laid side by side on the station platforms left a lasting image in my mind.

Things got even worse, so let me spare you the details. That is why I find it hard to reflect on such things. The recollections stir up bad memories. I remember the many long nights we had to sit in the cold and damp basement of the house where we lived, crowded together, and sharing space with refugees from other cities. The refugee situation became so bad that our school became a refugee center.

They tried to house schools in provisional wooden barracks, but even those ultimately had to be used to make room for the influx of even more refugees from everywhere. For that reason, I was essentially left with a totally disrupted and inadequate elementary education. A neighboring lady, a retired school teacher and friend of my mother tried to help out with some lessons and a bit of irregular home schooling.

We went nearby to forests to try to find edible mushrooms, to harvest wild straw berries, blue berries, raspberries and blackberries, being buzzed and harassed all the while by big and viciously biting horseflies. We also went out to gather up dry tree branches as fire wood, and filled sacks with pine cones, to haul home in small wagons, so we could heat our apartment in the winter months.

It was exhausting, tiring and tedious, but oh so necessary work, even for a young fellow going on nine years of age, his older brother and younger sisters. Coal was rationed and not easy to come by. Such was life in (the allegedly great and glorious) Third Reich, supposedly to last a thousand years, but which collapsed into ruins and defeat within nine years.

Toward the end of the war, I along with many others were literally and figuratively reduced to beggars, wandering from farm village to farm village, from farm to farm, begging for food: a slice of bread, an egg, a tiny bit of meat...taking whatever was given, often grudgingly, more often than not coming home with nothing at all.

At times, I even ran with a small gang of street urchins, and we stole food wherever we could find it and get away with it. So we swallowed our supposed middle class pride and did whatever it took to survive. So, you can perhaps see and understand, that I came to hate everything and anything connected with war. I detest all who glorify war. I abhor everything connected with war!

I am a pacifist at heart. I had seen, experienced and witnessed that war is deadly and destructive. I do not need to read about war in history books. I had seen the direct results and effects of war. I had seen the remains of the ruined city of Nuremberg, where streets were reduced to footpaths between huge mountains of rubble. My father fortunately survived and returned, but he was a sick and broken man, and very difficult to take for a child.

It took him years to regain his bearing. For that reason we hardly ever talked about his personal experiences. It was not until many years, almost decades later, when I was an adult, that he finally confided in me what he had lived through in order to survive. Between WWI and WWII, our family accounted for nine young relatives who did not return. Many relatives had lost their home and all their possessions in bombing raids, some in the most devastatingly senseless attacks in the last days of the war.[1]

War is horror. War is deadly. War is destructive. War is ugly and violent. There are no winners in war. There are only victims! I know what war is. I have experienced it. I remember it. I do not have to read about it in history books! I also have a profound sympathy for any and all, who also had to go through such tragic times. It is a bond which we share and which connects and unites us. One of my dearest friends is 92 years old Herman Taube (published poet, author, educator, journalist) and his wife Susi. They are both Holocaust survivors. I seriously recommend reading his latest book: *Surviving Despair: A Story about Perseverance*.

Gerhard A Fuerst

[1] I'm pretty sure what Gerhard refers to here are the senseless horrific slaughter of German civilian populations through the fire bombings *of the people* of Dresden (and of other cities)—no significant military targets were attacked—February 13-15, 1945 (when the war was practically won—it ended in early May 1945). — bw

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