

The Causes of War

THE TWO WORLD WARS COMPARED

WHEN we study the causes of wars we ought always to bear two distinctions in mind. There is a distinction between the occasion and the causes of a war. There is, furthermore, a distinction between the causes of a war and the circumstances—the given conditions—in which it broke out.

The first of these distinctions is widely recognised. Most people appreciate that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke at Sarajevo in 1914 and the subsequent decision of the Austrian government to despatch an ultimatum to Serbia, steps which occasioned the first World War, were not causes of the war in any meaningful sense of the word. It is obvious that Hitler's attack on Poland was only the occasion of the second World War—and so much so that, while a few writers have been tempted by this fact to argue that Hitler was no more responsible for war than anyone else, most retain the opposite view: because Hitler's policies were basically aggressive, some other crisis must have occasioned a European war in the years of his power if the Polish crisis had not done so.

The same thing cannot be said of the distinction between the causes of war and the conditions in which wars have occurred. This is rarely clearly drawn. There is, it is true, a general acceptance that two different fields of enquiry exist here—the study of the framework of historical and other circumstances and problems in which states were pursuing their policies; the analysis of the policies which states were pursuing. But because it is judged to be difficult to keep these fields of enquiry apart—because it is impossible to deny that men's policies are limited and deflected by the conditions in which they are at work—we generally end up by blurring the lines between them.

Some blurring is perhaps inescapable. But if we must recognise that men's policies are always influenced by the given conditions, we do not have to accept that they are always—if ever—utterly controlled by them. On the contrary, it would seem to be necessary to suppose that the relationship between circumstances and policies might well be a variable and fluctuating one—both as between one historical period and another and, secondly, as between different governments in the same period. It must be admitted, however, that, at least on the second of these two fronts, this supposition does not carry us much farther forward. As we shall see, it can be of value when we are comparing recent wars with the wars of earlier ages. It is of little assistance when we are investigating only the causes of recent wars.

What is to be concluded, for example, from the following comparison between the two World Wars of the twentieth century? There is widespread agreement that, from the point of view of the policies that were being pursued by Germany, there was an essential difference between the causes of these two wars. Hundreds of books have been written in the attempt to establish what were the policies of the major powers in the years before 1914, to lay bare the motives which underlay those policies, and to discover whether some, if any, of these policies were more responsible than others for the outbreak of the first World War. The debate has gone on because a degree of ambiguity, of uncertainty of goal and intention, was actually involved in the German policies of the time. We are almost free of this problem, on the other hand, in connection with the war which broke out in 1939. Historians are, rightly, nearly unanimous that, in this field of policy, the causes of the second World War were the personality and the aims of Adolf Hitler. They may dispute as to whether Hitler's policies were more pathological than Machiavellian or more Machiavellian than pathological. They may be puzzled to know what were his long-term intentions in seeking war, which should not surprise us since, beyond a certain point, he was puzzled himself. But on this, at least, they mostly see eye to eye: on this level, at any rate, it was Hitler's aggressiveness that caused the war. Nor has Mr A. J. P. Taylor had much success in his wish to shake this conclusion. It is one thing to show that up to the early months of 1939 Hitler had no intention of attacking Poland when he in fact attacked her, in September 1939, and to argue that he was led to act then only by the British guarantee to the Poles. Apart from the fact that it is impossible to prove the second of these statements — for we do not know how Hitler would have proceeded after the spring of 1939 if Great Britain's policy had not then changed — it is quite another thing to establish that, because the war he embarked upon was not the war he had expected, Hitler never intended to risk a European war, and to fight one if other powers refused to stand aside.

From these considerations we can deduce, if we wish, that Hitler was more ruthless and blatant in his aggressiveness than the government of Kaiser Wilhelm because he was more at the mercy of the given conditions than were his predecessors; and we can point to the intervening degradation of Germany, on the one hand, and to the increased instability of the international system, on the other, as constituting limitations and pressures that were far greater for him than any that had existed for them. Equally plausibly, however, we can conclude that, if they were more tentative and irresolute than he, it was because he was *less* in the grip of the given conditions—aware of them, but plainly and deliberately out to exploit them in a fashion that was untypical of most of the men who were influential in Germany before 1914 as also of most of the governments of his own time. At bottom, indeed, these rival deductions underlie the two schools of thought which have emerged in the controversy about the origins of

the second World War. Although even he admits that Hitler's appetite was greater than normal and that he 'may have projected a great war all along',¹ A. J. P. Taylor adopts the first of these positions. His starting point is that Hitler was at work in a profoundly disturbed and, for him, distinctly advantageous situation and that, really, when you come to think about it, he did nothing which any other government would not have been tempted or impelled to do if it had been similarly placed. The majority of students of the matter, on the other hand, cling to the second position when they argue that it was Hitler's abnormal aggressiveness, mainly, which caused the war.

There is something fundamentally unsatisfactory about this situation. So long as it prevails controversy is bound to linger, if not to mount. And this is all the more likely because few of even those who conclude that Hitler's policies were the main cause of the war maintain that these policies were the sole cause of it. The predominant attitude in the majority school of thought is that Hitler was the main or the immediate cause of war in 1939, as it is that the less openly aggressive German policies of the years before 1914 were the main or the immediate cause of the first World War, but that other factors existed as the subsidiary or the profound, the contributory or the underlying, causes of those conflicts. It is to assume, in other words, that the causes of war must be sought both on the level of the policies of governments and in the framework of given conditions in which those policies were formulated. For when we talk of the subsidiary or contributory causes of these wars we invariably have in mind not merely the consequences of the policies and the mistakes of other powers than Germany, but also the historical and other circumstances which formed the structure of relationships and rivalries in which war broke out. And when we talk of the profound or underlying causes of these wars it is invariably these given conditions alone that we invoke.

It is worth asking, accordingly, whether we ought to go on making this assumption. And this is all the more the case in that, apart from the unsatisfactory situation which has just been outlined, there are several other grounds for abandoning it. It may be suggested, indeed, that we would make a positive advance in understanding, at least in relation to these most recent wars, if we would distinguish more rigorously than we do between the causes of war and the given conditions in which war has broken out, would insist on confining the causes wholly to the aims and the policies of the powers and would regard all other considerations as constituting only the given conditions in which the powers had to conduct themselves. To adopt this position would be tantamount to deciding that the given conditions must be seen as being a challenge thrown down to governments—a set of circumstances and problems which it was their task to surmount without the resort to war—and that these wars were the outcome of their refusal or their failure to meet the challenge. It

¹ *The Origins of the Second World War*, London, 1961, pp.106, 279.

might be objected that this is a hopelessly rationalistic or hopelessly idealistic position, and that no self-respecting historian or political scientist could adopt it. To this objection I am tempted to reply that, on the contrary, the argument is only another way of stating the opposite of the Clausewitz dictum—of saying that, far from war being the continuation of policy by other means, a policy which ends in war is *ipso facto* a criminal or a bankrupt policy—and that it is high time that this dictum was deprived of its continuing if unconscious influence on historical studies. For nearly a hundred years now it has been rejected, after all, in the normal practice of states and by the climate of opinion among realistic no less than among idealistic men.

Thus, to turn to the further arguments in favour of taking this position, the first is suggested by the thought that it is extremely difficult to find any period of time in the recent history of this wicked world in which the given conditions were not such as to make war possible or even quite likely to break out—supposing that governments had been disposed to indulge in it or, even, had not been on their guard against it. In the generation which ended in 1914 and in the generation between 1918 and 1939 there must have been an earlier war or more frequent general wars if most states had not been bent on, and successful in, avoiding it—just as there must already have been general war again since 1945 if most states had not resumed this salutary effort. It is almost a precondition of balanced judgement about the outbreaks of war, in modern history at least, that we should study not only the outbreaks but also those many occasions on which war might have, but did not, come.

If we push this thought a little further we come across another argument in favour of adopting the position I have advocated—if also for thinking that it is applicable only to the wars of recent history. Until comparatively recently—until at least the eighteenth century; perhaps even until the middle years of the nineteenth, when the increase in the technological complexity and the destructiveness of warfare first became pronounced—governments *were* disposed to indulge in war, and were in any case but poorly placed and organised for the task of avoiding it. The more we reflect on international history the more we are forced to realise that in and as between even the more developed of the world's societies it was not until then that technological and other shifts began to change this age-old situation. Probably it is not too much to say that it was not until the generation of armed peace which preceded the first World War that a new situation was solidly established. Until well into the eighteenth century inter-state war, if limited in scope, was frequent, not to say virtually continuous. Of the past hundred years, at any rate, after an intervening period of indecisive character in this respect, peace has been punctured by general war between the major states only at long intervals; and there is no reason to doubt that this is a reflection of the fact that of all the decisions which advanced governments have

to take, most of which are difficult, the decision to risk a general war has at last become the most difficult of all.

It is true that, just as it takes two to make a love affair or a marriage but only one to start a fight, so—the international system being what it is—the policies and actions of a single government could still leave other governments with no alternative to war. That governments which have thus bowed to the unavoidable have done so with great reluctance is only what we should expect, even if it is a consideration which has not always been allowed due weight by students of the Triple Entente before 1914 or of the appeasement policies of the western powers before 1939. But indecision on the ultimate issue of peace or war has been just as marked a feature in the conduct of even restless, thrusting governments during these years. The policies of the Kaiser's government present us with what is almost a problem in psychology because, while they were fundamentally aggressive they were also, on this account, notably hesitant. Nobody will understand Hitler who fails to recognise that his tendency to shrink from a general war whenever he came up to the post was as pronounced as his determination to have war when he was brooding between the crises he engineered. One sign that he was more aggressive than his predecessors, indeed, is to be found in the fact that he engineered these crises not merely in the hope that other powers would yield, but also because he loathed his own vacillation on the ultimate issue—as a means of cutting off his own retreat.

This underlying truth about the behaviour of the more organised governments during the past hundred years has been given insufficient attention by students of the causes of recent wars. As I have implied already, their investigations fall roughly into two schools in this context, according to whether they give more relative weight to the consequences of the aims and policies of governments—to the human element in the situation—or to the impersonal framework constituted by the given conditions. On the part of the first school this oversight has set up a tendency not only to belittle the difficulties created for other governments by the existence of a restless or rogue power, but also to dramatise the conduct and the motives of the rogue. Hence, in part, the current disposition of a few German historians, in reaction against the previous inability of most German historians to admit that their country's government bore any but the slightest indirect responsibility for the first World War, to go unnecessarily far to the opposite extreme by urging that the German government deliberately exploited the Sarajevo crisis with the settled intention of bringing about a general war.² Hence, again, the over-simplified assumption that Hitler possessed from the outset a cut-and-dried programme of expansion and conquest by means of war—an over-simplification against which Mr Taylor has properly protested. For the second school, of which Mr Taylor is nevertheless, as we

² See, for example, F. Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, Dusseldorf, 1961.

have seen, a member, the oversight has had equally unfortunate consequences. If Mr Taylor had borne in mind that in modern conditions even aggressive governments have shrunk from major war he would not have wrested from the fact that Hitler had no cut-and-dried war-plan from the outset the conclusion that Hitler was not disposed to undertake a general war; and he would have seen more clearly than he does that there was bound to come a time when Hitler's aggressive policies would put an insupportable strain upon the international system. If, to take a further example, the above consideration were given its due weight by members of this second school who are less historically-minded than Mr Taylor, and thus more committed to its central tenets, they would not find it so easy as they do to neglect altogether the detailed study of the aims and policy of governments—to confine their search for the causes of the two World Wars wholly to the given conditions.

The upholders of this extreme position—which is the direct antithesis of the position I am suggesting that historians ought to begin to adopt—are those who maintain that the wars were the outcome of the capitalist system or of imperialism or of nationalism or of the regrettable existence of the independent sovereign state. Their conviction is not that all governments are always and equally malign, though this might at first sight seem to be their view. It is that all governments are malign—unless they are Marxist-Leninist states whose principles will not tolerate, or little states whose power does not permit, imperialist activity and other foreign excess—because they are all the victims of 'the system'. They believe that war has been the result of the system and will remain unavoidable until the system—the structure of given conditions—is destroyed. Mr Taylor has pointed to some of the fallacies underlying this conviction: if it were true that the existence of the state was an inevitable cause of war, 'then the states of Europe should never have known peace since the close of the middle ages'; to argue that capitalism inevitably caused the second World War is to overlook the fact that 'the great capitalist states . . . were the most anxious to avoid war'.³ But it is not merely the case that he himself, with his belief that Hitler behaved only as any other government in the same circumstances might have done, is not all that far removed from these more extreme conclusions. In addition, they can be shown to be still more misguided than he has indicated.

For what is to be thought of an argument which maintains that capitalist states have been bent on or unable to escape war, from the fact of being capitalist states, when the evidence of international history is to the effect that it was from about the time that states became capitalist that they began to be able to avoid war, and began actually to avoid it? When almost continuous war was the inevitable concomitant—to use something like Marxist language—of the feudal and the bourgeois-liberal stages, it cannot be very helpful to assert

³ Taylor, pp.102, 104.

that less frequent war has been the inevitable concomitant of the capitalist stage; and we are entitled to question whether even this claim can be true. What, again, is to be thought of the belief that during all these stages war has been the unavoidable consequence of the very existence of the state? This may seem to be less easy to dismiss than the Marxist doctrine if only because it is more generalised. Certainly, it is impossible to dismiss it solely on the ground that war has become less frequent as states have become more efficient. War itself has become more efficient, more devastating, in the course of this same process; and as a result, even if the existence of the state were the sufficient cause of war, the state would have needed recurring periods of peace for the recuperation of its powers. If this belief is to be thoroughly discredited we need some demonstration that it is not the existence of states that has been the cause of wars but the way in which states have behaved, and that there has been nothing inevitable about their behaviour.

We may find such a demonstration, I believe, by making a comparison between the two World Wars of the kind that is rarely undertaken. If we return to the distinction between the policies pursued by states and what I have called the given conditions in which policies are formulated and applied, we can say that the given conditions in which the two wars occurred—what others term the underlying or the contributory causes of the wars—were totally unlike. Here are some of the obvious differences, with some equally obvious comments on them.

The first World War broke out at a time when governments, like peoples, had little or no inkling of the vast increase in the potential destructiveness of warfare that had been taking place since the 1860s. The war of 1939 broke out when, on the contrary, men were, if anything, too much obsessed with the fearful consequences of total war on account of their experience of trench warfare in the earlier conflict and because of the development of the bomber. Historians have concluded from the first of these facts that the persistence of an antiquated, not to say a gay, approach to the fighting of a war was a secondary or a contributory or even a profound cause of the War of 1914. What are we to conclude from the second? from the fact that in every country in 1939, not excepting Germany, the onset of war was a source of dread if not, as was in some places the case, of panic? We can conclude if we wish that ignorance of the horrors of war and obsession with its horrors equally contributed to bring war about. But would it not be more reasonable to conclude that men's assumptions and reactions on this score were irrelevant to the causes of war on each occasion?

War broke out in 1914 after years of armaments rivalry. It broke out in 1939 when all the major states, not excepting Germany, were unprepared for a major war from this point of view. It has often been urged that the armaments race was itself a profound or a secondary cause of the first World War. Was the military unprepared-

ness of the powers equally a profound or a secondary cause of the second World War? Or would it be wiser to conclude that the armaments situation, as such, had nothing to do with the case on either occasion?

It used to be a widespread conviction, again, that the war of 1914 was caused by the alliance systems that had grown up between the great powers. In Great Britain between the two wars, as always in the United States until after the second World War, it was almost an article of faith that alliances themselves breed war. Using this kind of argument, however, we can equally plausibly contend that the war of 1939 was caused by the absence of alliances. For it is another serious difference between the two pre-war periods that no firm alliance existed before the second World War. On Hitler's side it is true that there was the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis. But this was not an alliance to engage in war together, either defensively or offensively; and neither Italy nor Japan made her entry into the war until Germany had made her major war-time gains. The one alliance which helped Hitler to make these gains was the Russo-German pact of August 1939; but this was entered upon not only at the eleventh hour but also because war was imminent. The onset of war created the Russo-German pact, not the pact the onset of war. Among Hitler's future enemies no commitments in effect existed—not even of the informal kind that had been established between France and Great Britain and Great Britain and Russia before 1914—between France, Great Britain, the United States and Russia. None of the alliances made by France against the German danger—neither those with the small Eastern European states nor that with Russia of 1935—withstood the deterioration of the international situation after 1936. They were no more influential in bringing about that deterioration or in increasing Hitler's restlessness than they were in making resistance to Hitler effective. The same may be said of the one important engagement which Great Britain accepted in these years. Whatever may be thought of the argument that the Anglo-Polish alliance of 1939 was unwise in that it forced Hitler to act, there can be no question that it was forced upon the British government by Hitler's policy and that it contributed in no way to the deterioration of the pre-war situation.

If we are to persist in the belief that alliances were an underlying or a contributory cause of the first World War, then, we have no alternative but to argue that the absence of alliances was an underlying or a contributory cause of the second—that conditions of affairs which were in this respect wholly different equally helped to cause war. Nor is this rigid alternative logically escapable if we turn our attention to what might be deduced from a wider or more general divergence between the character of the two pre-war periods—a divergence to which these more detailed differences have already pointed.

War broke out in 1914 when flexibility and room for manoeuvre between the great powers had been reduced, over a period of years, to negligible proportions. So much was it the case that war occurred in conditions of international deadlock, with all the powers insisting on at least maintaining every inch of acquired position, that it has often been concluded that it broke out as a result of the deadlock, which made every move a fateful move. But war broke out in 1939 when the international instability, though no less acute, was such as left enormous room for manoeuvre between the powers. To illustrate the extent of this difference we have only to compare the pre-war crises in the two cases. In every crisis between 1905 and 1914 the outcome of immense effort, of most intricate diplomacy, not to say duplicity, was infinitesimal concrete gain. Of each of the crises that preceded the war of 1939 the astonishing features were the size and importance of Hitler's as of Italy's and Japan's acquisitions—in China, Abyssinia, the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia—and the ease with which they were obtained.

This is not the place for an explanation of this difference. It is sufficient to say that if anything is clear about the pre-1939 situation it is that it was extremely favourable to the rectification of old grievances, not to speak of the assertion of new strength, without a general war—as some Germans, from Stresemann in the nineteen-twenties to German generals in the nineteen-thirties, clearly recognised. Yet a general war arose in this fluid condition of unbalance as, previously, a general war had arisen in the opposite condition of rigid deadlock. Once again, either we must conclude that fluidity was a cause of war in the one case, as deadlock was a cause of war in the previous case, or we ought to abandon an approach which looks for the causes of these wars, in any useful sense of the word, in this field. We must either insist that varying kinds of international disturbance, like different attitudes to war, different armaments situations, alliances and the absence of alliances, being equally consequences of the existence of the state, are equally liable to constitute the causes of war. Or we should abandon the notion that on the causes of war the existence of the state and the nature of the given conditions, in the generation of which the state is the catalyst if not the general motor, have any useful bearing.

In the first of these approaches there is nothing inherently absurd. It commits us to the belief that widely variable, not to say opposite, conditions may cause war; but the logical mind need have no difficulty in believing that. The trouble with it is that it has shortcomings in other directions. Mr Taylor was searching for these when he said that it explains everything—and explains nothing.⁴ But for reasons which have perhaps been sufficiently indicated he did not go far enough. It would be nearer the mark to say that this approach has two serious weaknesses. The first emerges if we apply it to the whole of international history: it explains everything up to the eighteenth

⁴ Taylor, p.102.

century and nothing that has occurred in the past hundred years. The second emerges when we apply it to the past hundred years, and more particularly to the period which suffered from two world wars. It is this. While we may logically assume that highly different given conditions may cause war, we know as a matter of fact that highly dangerous given conditions have not invariably had this outcome.

For one central feature of the history of relations and of war between states, if I am right in my understanding of it, is that up to the eighteenth century, by the limitations of their nature and the nature of their limitations, states were entirely at the mercy of circumstances, so that frequent warfare between them was as near as makes no matter inevitable. And another feature of that history, no less pronounced, is that by about a century ago states—at least the more powerful and advanced among them—had so far altered in themselves and in their relation to the given conditions that war has since occurred only when their ability to control these conditions has been abandoned. If war was inevitable before that time we cannot say that war has been inevitable in the same sense since. We can say of the past hundred years, if we wish, that, while no particular war was inevitable, it remained inevitable that war would recur from time to time—that while it was enough for only one state to abandon it, it remained inevitable that the ability to avoid war would now and again be abandoned by one or another state. If we say this, however, we shall be wise to confine the causes of war to the reasons why this ability was abandoned and to expect to find those reasons sufficiently revealed by an investigation of the aims and the policies of states.

One ground for taking this view is that it will enable us to put the outbreak of recent wars into correct perspective in relation to earlier wars. Another, which is no less important, is that it will help us to see what is probably the correct relationship between those recent wars and the contemporary international situation. Some time hence, and probably before much longer, we shall be able to discern, I suspect, that another major change in the international system, comparable to that which took place between the beginning of the eighteenth century and the eighteen-sixties, took place during a period of years beginning in 1945. And if I am not much mistaken, it will be apparent that this will have been the underlying cause of this further shift: the readiness of the more developed states to relinquish their control over the given conditions will have been further reduced, so that their ability to avoid war when they wish to avoid it will no longer be questioned.

F. H. HINSLEY

St John's College, Cambridge