

1 The revisionist as moralist

A. J. P. Taylor and the lessons of European history

Gordon Martel

Images of the 1930s continue to flash past us: Hitler's moustache and Chamberlain's umbrella are still instantly recognizable; Nazi war criminals still make the front pages; novels and films warning of a new menace emanating from Brazil or Bavaria can be almost assured of popular success. The Second World War, its symbols and personalities, continue to grip the modern imagination. Thus the war – and its origins – functions today as a mental and moral shorthand: anyone wishing to evoke an image of wickedness personified need only mention "Hitler"; for stupidity, blundering or cowardice, substitute "Chamberlain." But political rhetoric extends the boundary beyond personality. The systems we condemn are "totalitarian" or "dictatorships" (frequently both), and we must never be guilty of "appeasement" in our relations with their leaders. Politicians find these words useful because ordinary citizens agree that the Second World War was caused by Hitler and his totalitarian dictatorship, and that it might have been prevented had it not been for the policy of appeasement that served only to whet his appetite.

Anyone who doubts that these simple assumptions are widely, almost universally, subscribed to is invited to witness the effect of setting loose a class of undergraduates on A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War*. There the effect is electric: they are stunned to read that Hitler neither planned nor caused the war, that appeasement was not necessarily a bad thing, that new ideologies such as fascism and communism were much less significant than the aims and ambitions of statesmen, typical of all regimes, at all times. If the student is converted to the Taylor view, war is almost certain to break out on the home front; the young may be prepared to embrace new ideas, even if only as a temporary fashion, but their parents are more likely to regard them as treasonable. Two generations after its publication *Origins* has not lost its power to provoke.

When the book first appeared in 1961 it created a storm. Professional historians attacked Taylor for almost every imaginable sin: his evidence was scanty and unreliable; he distorted documents by means of selective citation and dismissed those he disliked by claiming they did not count; his logic was faulty; he contradicted himself repeatedly and drew conclusions at variance with his

own evidence. Nor was the storm confined to the citadels of academia – to scholarly journals, college corridors, senior common-rooms and faculty clubs. The debate was carried on in public – in newspapers, on television and radio. Questions were asked in Parliament. Lifelong friendships were dissolved. Careers were made and unmade. Taylor was soon the best-known historian in Britain: his autobiography was a best-seller; an entire issue of *The Journal of Modern History* was devoted to him; he has been honored with three *Festschriften*, and any book with his name on it has been assured of popular success. One eminent historian, when asked to contribute an essay to the first edition of this book, declined on the ground that Taylor had no right to hold the first-mortgage on the subject of the origins of the Second World War. He may not have the right, but hold the mortgage he does. What other 38-year-old book on the war's origins continues not only to be available in paperback but can be seen to be stacked high in university bookstores throughout the English-speaking world? Teachers wishing to shake students out of their lethargy do well to introduce them to A. J. P. Taylor.

But the great man is now dead and most of the furor that emanated from his book has gone with him. Nevertheless, interest in him remains strong, the debate on the war's origins continues and the book stimulates controversy still. Book-length studies have now appeared in the form of Robert Cole's *A. J. P. Taylor: The Traitor Within the Gates* and Adam Sisman's *A. J. P. Taylor: A Biography*, the scholarship and insights of both of which will be surpassed by Kathy Burk's in her forthcoming biography.¹ New surveys, especially Philip Bell's *Origins of the Second World War in Europe* and Akira Iriye's *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*, but also Andrew Crozier's *The Causes of the Second World War* and Richard Overy's *The Origins of the Second World War*, have certainly replaced Taylor's as books in which teachers can have confidence when introducing students to the subject. But those very characteristics that make these newer works more reliable make them less exciting, less challenging and – ultimately – less enduring. Less careful, less balanced, more opinionated and more provocative, Taylor's book will remain in print long after his successors' have ceased publication. It may be, as some argue, that he will continue to be read largely as “an historical curiosity,” or mainly by graduate students exploring the historiography of the subject, or by general readers looking for someone who can be read for amusement and entertainment. But read Taylor certainly will be.

The first question to be asked is why the book caused such a storm when it appeared. The answer is that Taylor challenged an interpretation of the war's origins that had until 1961 satisfied almost everyone in the postwar world, and because he conducted his challenge in flamboyant prose with such scathing wit. Before Taylor launched his attack, the only point being debated was whether the appeasers were foolish cowards who allowed themselves to be duped by Hitler, or cunning capitalists who hoped to use Hitler to crush communism in the Soviet Union. Blaming the war on Hitler certainly suited the Germans: with the Nazis either dead or in hiding, they could claim to be blameless and to have a claim to a respectable role in the new democratic alliance. This was equally

satisfactory in the west, where one might have expected an Orwellian unease to emerge when the enemy was transformed into ally and the ally into enemy—but the west now claimed to be united against “totalitarianism” rather than against states or nations. The Second World War had been fought for a great and noble principle, and this principle endured into the era of the Cold War. The enemy had merely changed location: his ambitions and tactics remained the same.

Taylor would have none of this. The war had not been fought over great principles, nor had Hitler planned its outbreak from the start. Taylor thereby challenged two of the most confident assumptions of the 1950s. While others saw in Hitler a demonic genius who was able to pull the strings of European politics so masterfully because he had a carefully mapped out plan, Taylor saw only an ordinary politician who responded to events as they occurred, who asked only how he might benefit from them. Where others saw laid down in *Mein Kampf* a blueprint, Taylor heard the confused babble of beer-hall chatter. Where others saw a timetable for war in such documents as the “Hossbach memorandum,” Taylor saw the petty intrigue and political machinations typical of the Nazi system of government. If Taylor was right – if Hitler had not in fact carefully plotted his route to world dominion well in advance and then followed the route step-by-step this could only raise new, and possibly awkward, questions. Some believed that Taylor was whitewashing Hitler, absolving him of guilt.

But Taylor did not stop with Hitler. He took a contrary view of almost every significant figure of the interwar period: Chamberlain was neither a bungler nor a coward, but a highly skilled politician who enjoyed the overwhelming support of his party and his nation; Stresemann, the “good German” but for whose death Germany might have followed a peaceful path, turns out to have shared Hitler’s dreams of dominating eastern Europe; Roosevelt’s economic policies were difficult to distinguish from Hitler’s; Stalin turns out to have been Europe’s most conservative statesman, proposing to uphold the peace settlement of 1919 and wishing the League of Nations to be an effective international institution, rather than a monstrous ideologue plotting world revolution. If readers were not offended by Taylor’s revisionist sketch of Hitler himself, they were almost certain to find offense elsewhere in his book.

If readers discovered heroes and villains being turned upside down in *Origins*, they also found states being turned inside-out. Anyone who believed in a wicked Russia, a noble Poland, a beleaguered France, an efficient Italy or a nationalistic Czechoslovakia would have their assumptions rudely challenged. Russia never did more than ask to be accepted as a legitimate sovereign state; Poland – corrupt and elitist as it was – was not a state such that one could be proud of having fought to save it; France had consistently aimed to draw in the new states of central and eastern Europe to fight on its behalf – while never intending to assist them in any way; Italy was not the powerful representative of a dynamic new political system, but the foolish plaything of a blustering and blundering egomaniac; Czechoslovakia, even though democratic, “had a canker at her heart,” its large German minority alienated from the Czech-dominated centralized state.²

Throughout *Origins* Taylor demonstrated an uncanny ability to see parallels and ironies that were certain to make readers squirm in their chairs. The intervention of the League of Nations in the Abyssinian crisis resulted in Haile Selassie losing all of his country instead of only half. Was Ramsay MacDonald not fittingly described as a “renegade socialist”? Was it better to be an abandoned Czech or a saved Pole? Did Munich not represent much that was best in British public life? There is hardly a page in the book that fails to unsettle complacent beliefs or challenge conventional wisdom, and this is always done crisply, with verve and frequently with biting sarcasm. Taylor’s wit could cut deep. Samuel Hoare, he said, was “as able intellectually as any British foreign secretary of the twentieth century – perhaps not a very high standard” (p. 122). What was the response of the Slovaks to Hitler’s destruction of their independence? They were to provide him with a steady and reliable satellite throughout the war (p. 240). When Britain and France declared war on Germany in September 1939, they went to war “for that part of the peace settlement which they had long regarded as least defensible” (p. 335).

The embittered irony characteristic of his approach was certain to arouse an impassioned response because Taylor treated the subject in an old-fashioned way. Instead of treating statesmen and their policies as the products of deep-rooted impersonal forces, he placed them at the center of the story. Popular audiences always respond more enthusiastically to history that concentrates on people, and those who read *Origins* when it appeared still had vivid impressions of, and strong feelings toward, the people about whom Taylor was writing. Those who had fought Hitler’s Germany, seen the newsreels of Chamberlain’s triumphant return from Munich, and argued over Franco’s crusade in Spain, were in their 40s and 50s when the book appeared. Such proximity would have counted for less had Taylor been more concerned with impersonal forces – had he, for instance, treated the diplomatic crises of the 1930s as reverberations of the economic collapse of 1929 – but this he steadfastly refused to do. “There was no reason why it should cause international tension. In most countries the Depression led to a turning away from international affairs” (p. 89). He put the actors of the interwar years back on the stage, and shone the spotlight on ambitions, schemes, and characteristics that many preferred to forget. It was depressing to be reminded that Churchill had admired Mussolini and favored Franco; that Chamberlain’s desire to avoid intervention in Europe followed the liberal traditions established by Cobden, Bright, and Gladstone; that Roosevelt turned his back on Europe; and that no western statesman showed any real concern about the plight of the Jews in Germany prior to the outbreak of the war.

Taylor struck a blow against the complacency of the 1950s. In his account the origins of the war ceased to be a simple morality play in which the weak-kneed failed to face up to the evil. His account really was old-fashioned. The interests of states and the ambitions of statesmen were treated as if there had been no break with the nineteenth century, as if ideology and technology were of trivial importance compared to the basic principles of modern statecraft first enunciated by Machiavelli four centuries earlier. The lines of continuity to be

found in Germany's ambitious designs to dominate central and eastern Europe, in Russia's fears of invasion from the west, in Italy's dream of a neo-Roman Mediterranean, and in the traditions of British foreign policy, were of vastly greater significance in Taylor's treatment than were swastikas and fasces, than Marx and Nietzsche. It is ironic that this traditionalism was, in the world of 1961, a form of rebellion.

Eschewing underlying forces and political philosophies, Taylor restored drama to the events leading up to the war. He told his story in narrative form, but readers who followed the story would not find themselves, in the Churchillian phrase, being led "step-by-step" into the abyss. No – the events were not neat and simple but complicated, ragged, contradictory, and ironic. Few things were what they seemed: the Reichstag fire should be attributed not to clever Nazi plotting but to a Dutch arsonist (and the Nazis genuinely believed it to have been the communist intrigue they proclaimed it); the result "odd and unforeseen" – of the Locarno treaties was to prevent military co-operation between Britain and France; the *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria was not the result of a carefully planned invasion – 70 percent of German vehicles broke down on their journey to the frontier, while 99 percent of the people of united Germany and Austria voted in favor of the union, "a genuine reflection of German feeling"; when the war itself broke out it was not to be regarded as a conflict between totalitarian dictatorship and democracy but as "the war between the three Western Powers over the settlement of Versailles" (p. 336).

The events leading to war were not what they appeared to be, nor were they brought about by those who appeared to be in control. In Taylor's presentation, instead of Hitler and Mussolini cleverly pulling all the strings that made the others move, it was the weak, the second-rate, and the forgotten who made things happen. The puppets and their masters had changed places. Papen and Hindenburg "thrust" power on Hitler by imploring him to become chancellor; he did not have to "seize" control (p. 101). Schuschnigg brought about the collapse of Austria when his police raided the headquarters of the Austrian Nazis – there was no "planned aggression only hasty improvisation" – Hitler was taken by surprise and Papen "started the ball rolling" (p. 181). Blum and Baldwin, not Hitler and Mussolini, decided the outcome of the Spanish Civil War; French radicals "objected to aiding an allegedly Communist cause abroad" (pp. 157–8). Benes chose "to screw up the tension" in Czechoslovakia, negotiating with the Sudeten Germans in order to force them openly into demanding Czechoslovakia's dissolution and thereby compelling the western powers to assert themselves against such an extreme and unfavorable solution (pp. 192–3). Throughout *Origins* readers are given the distinct impression that no one was in control, that Hitler and Mussolini did no more than respond to the movements of others – to the agitations of Sudeten Germans, to the outbreak of Civil War in Spain, to the Slovakian demands for autonomy. Meanwhile, "the statesmen of western Europe moved in a moral and intellectual fog" (p. 141).

Finally, when men do act, seize the initiative, and attempt to control events, the results they get are seldom what they bargained for. The Lytton Commission,

which condemned Japan for resorting to force in Manchuria and provoked it into withdrawing from the League of Nations, had actually been set up through an initiative of the Japanese. Franco rewarded the assistance of Germany and Italy by declaring his neutrality during the Munich crisis and maintaining it throughout the Second World War. When Hitler, following Munich, denounced the “warmongers” – Churchill, Eden, and Duff Cooper – “in the belief that this would lead to an explosion against them,” he produced the opposite effect. When Chamberlain signed the alliance with Poland in 1939 he had, “without design,” made Danzig the decisive question and thereby took a stand “on peculiarly weak ground” (pp. 264–5). According to Taylor, even when men know what they want and believe they see their way clear to getting it, the consequences are rarely foreseen and often turn out to be the opposite of what was intended.

The reason why *The Origins of the Second World War* proved so explosive is that Taylor’s revisionism went far beyond the usual boundaries erected by his profession. Had he been content to create a more “balanced” view – by pointing out those occasions on which Hitler followed no timetable, contradicted himself, or was pushed along by others – he may have caused a stir, but this would likely have been restricted to a few specialists arguing the merits of the case in scholarly journals. Instead, Taylor turned the interwar world upside down – and shook it hard. Leaders turned out to be followers; ideologues became realists; the weak were strong. Events followed no pattern. Accidents ruined plans. Readers who pick up *Origins* for the first time now, long after it was written, are likely to find it exciting and entertaining still: there is hardly a page that fails to provoke, that fails to challenge someone’s assumptions about something. The reverberations wrought by Taylor’s shaking can still be felt.

The most surprising feature of the controversy that erupted is that anyone familiar with Taylor’s work should have been surprised by the approach he took when he turned to this subject. All of the principal features of *Origins* – the crisp prose, the jokes, the biting sarcasm, the ironies, the narrative structure – are evident in his earlier works. So, too, were the basic lines of interpretation: statesmen everywhere scheme for advantage; accidents always destroy plans; interests invariably take precedence over ideas; and, most significantly, the course of modern international history is the story in the main of Germany’s attempt to dominate Europe and the efforts of others to prevent it from succeeding. The style, philosophy, and interpretation were clearly evident in *The Italian Problem in European Diplomacy, 1847–1849* (1934), *Germany’s First Bid for Colonies, 1884–1885* (1938), *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918* (1941), *The Course of German History* (1945), *Rumours of Wars* (1952), *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (1954), *Bismarck, the Man and the Statesman* (1955), *The Troublemakers* (1957), and in numerous essays and reviews. As the titles of these works suggest, three subjects formed the core of Taylor’s interests: central Europe; diplomacy; and modern history. Of particular concern was the way in which states were made and unmade, and how nationalism and imperialism – the two driving forces of the modern era – are connected with the onset of total war.

It would be astonishing that someone who had reached maturity in the 1920s should not have shown interest in war, nationalism, and revolution. The consequences of 1914–18 were readily apparent: the physical destruction, the disabled veterans, and the long lists of war dead inscribed on memorials; the disappearance of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires, and their replacement by new “national” states and the Soviet Union. The greatest historical controversy of the decade raged over the question of responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914; and Taylor later explained how he was struck by the contrast between this stormy debate and the quiet complacency that surrounded the origins of the Second World War. Even historians whose training and work had been in other fields and earlier periods turned to recent diplomatic history. One of them, the Austrian A. F. Pribram, had turned from Cromwell and the Puritan revolution of the seventeenth century to recent Anglo-Austrian relations. Thus, in one of the many “accidents” that transformed his “personal history,” Taylor – who had gone to Vienna to work with Pribram on Cromwell – was diverted from English domestic history to European diplomacy. His personal and professional life exemplified the connection between the profound forces of the age and the effect of chance and circumstance.

Taylor also explained that he followed the fashion of the 1920s in assuming that Germany had been unfairly burdened with the guilt of having initiated the First World War. But, as he set about investigating various aspects of modern European history, he discovered that he and the “revisionists” were wrong, that the peacemakers of Versailles were right: the responsibility for the war lay with Germany. By the time he came to write *Origins*, he regarded Germany as the dynamic element in European politics over the past century; it was Germany that was growing, expanding, looking forward to a future when it would be dominant in Europe and able to take up the position of a full-fledged world power.

One of the distinctive features of *Origins* is the connections that are constantly made between the interwar years and the nineteenth century; while most historians concentrated on Hitlerism and ideology – usually treating these as aberrations in statecraft – Taylor was keen to show the links between William II and Hitler, the parallels between Chamberlain and Gladstone, the continuity of Russian policies from the Romanovs to the Soviets. The great powers hoped the Spanish Civil War would burn itself out, he insisted, “as Metternich had hoped would happen with the Greek revolt in the 1820s” (p. 158). Schuschnigg suffered from the perpetual illusion, peculiar to the Austrians, that exposing nationalistic intrigue would stir the conscience of Europe into action – just as it had “seemed to them axiomatic in 1859 that Cavour would be deserted by Napoleon III” (p. 178). Stresemann shared Bismarck’s belief that peace was in Germany’s interest, although he was “no more inclined to peace from moral principle than Bismarck had been” (p. 79). These allusions to European politics of the nineteenth century warn the reader not to trust those who would treat the 1930s as if they had existed in a vacuum.

Taylor admired few statesmen. His favourite book, *The Troublemakers*, extolled the virtues of the dissenting tradition; his heroes were the critics and outsiders of English history – the Cobbetts and the Cobdens, the Lloyd Georges and the Beaverbrooks. And he showed how unreliable are the public utterances of men in power. While Lamartine, foreign minister and romantic poet, was boldly announcing a revolutionary French foreign policy in his manifesto of 1848, he was also apologizing for it in private, pleading with the Duke of Wellington to “understand its real sense” – that it was a gesture in public relations.³ When Taylor treated Hitler’s speeches and *Mein Kampf* as meaningless or untrustworthy pieces of self-advertisement, readers recoiled from the shock. But Taylor treated all statesmen in this way “Great men in public life love power,” he explained; “they fight to get it and they use it ruthlessly when it is in their hands.”⁴ They make speeches, write books and strike poses in order to dupe an unsuspecting public; it is the job of the historian not to be duped, to look for the reality behind the facade.

The principal reality highlighted by Taylor is that statesmen seek to maintain or extend the interests of their respective states. Those who take their own rhetoric and ideals too seriously are likely to land themselves in trouble. Palmerston’s greatness resided in his ability to recognize that, although he trumpeted liberal Whig ideas, the interest of peace sometimes meant cooperating with Austria in spite of the two countries’ ideological incompatibility. Palmerston would do the right thing when opportunity and interest combined (as they did during the unification of Italy), but he would do nothing for Poland or Hungary, as “the one was beyond his reach, the liberation of the other he supposed would have been against British interests.”⁵ Crispi, the prime minister who wished to turn his country into a great colonial power, “lived in a world of illusions and was leading Italy to disaster.”⁶ In all of Taylor’s work a motif is constructed in which it is the dreamers, the speculators, and the ambitious who allow their grand designs to overpower their appreciation of what is possible. Napoleon III, who attempted to destroy the balance of power, “substitute his own hegemony,” and replace the Holy Alliance with the “revolutionary association” of his dreams, led the Second Empire to destruction.⁷

Dreamers who act out their dreams are not the only ones who are dangerous in Taylor’s world – there are also those reactionaries whose nightmare visions of the future lead them to oppose all change and often end with them flinging themselves headlong into disaster in an act of national suicide. Such was Metternich, who “dreaded action, sought always to postpone decisions and cared only for repose”; when he fell from power he “brought down old Austria with him.”⁸ Conservatives are especially likely to fall prey to the temptation of believing that one dramatic act against liberals, radicals, nationalists, or revolutionaries will destroy the enemy, restore the balance, and remove uncertainty. When Austria–Hungary went to war in 1914, war was an end in itself: “the countless problems which had dragged on so long could all be crossed off the agenda.” Instead Austria–Hungary disappeared from the map.⁹ This is a complicated world that Taylor describes, one in which it is as dangerous to try to stop the movement

of the world as it is to speed it up, and whether one chooses to act or stand still the consequences can rarely be foreseen with any accuracy. In this, the world of Europe between the wars was little different from the Europe of the nineteenth century. Men continued to dance "the perpetual quadrille of the Balance of Power," as much as some of them might wish the music to stop so "that they could sit out a dance without maintaining the ceaseless watch on one another."¹⁰

Although the faces were different after 1919, the problem confronting European diplomacy remained the same: how to deal with the fact that Germany, still the greatest of the European powers, was more convinced than ever that the international system had been specially designed to thwart its designs. In fact, ringing it with small states, and forcing the Soviet Union out of the European equation, meant that when it recovered its cohesion and efficiency it would be stronger than ever. Taylor was certainly convinced, long before writing *The Origins of the Second World War*, that Germany had decided to exploit its potential for establishing hegemony in Europe. This was signified most dramatically when William II dismissed Bismarck and replaced him with advisers who favoured "world policy," who imagined that Germany was capable of realizing this ambition "before she had secured the mastery of Europe."¹¹ The differences between Bismarck, Bethmann-Hollweg, and Hitler were matters of temperament and tactics: when the heirs of Bismarck rose up in 1944 it was "Hitler's failure, not his *policy*," that drove them to resist.¹² In the 1930s the Germans sought to reduce Hungary to its true national size while incorporating the rest of the Habsburg monarchy into the German Reich; but before 1914 they had been restrained from this only by "dynastic scruples" and "twinges of Bismarck's caution."¹³ The First World War sprang from Germany's world policy, from its decisions to challenge both Russia and Great Britain as world powers.¹⁴ By the 1950s Taylor was repeatedly referring to the war of 1939–45 as "the second German war."

It must have seemed bizarre to Taylor when *Origins* was criticized by some as an apologia for Hitler, because the essence of his interpretation was the continuous line of development in modern European history whereby Germany sought to establish its domination of Europe by controlling the center and the east. Although he dismissed the notion that Hitler was a careful and meticulous planner, he clearly and unequivocally explained that Hitler "intended Germany to become the dominant power in Europe." But he also insisted that in this Hitler was "like every other German statesman" (p. 171). These were the two arguments that distinguished Taylor most clearly from other historians: Hitler ceased to be the mad genius who pulled all the strings and had the whole play worked out in advance; and he became just another German, struggling for mastery in Europe. Even Hitler's anti-Semitism had been "the Socialism of fools" for years: "everything which Hitler did against the Jews followed logically from the racial doctrines in which most Germans vaguely believed" (p. 100). If Taylor was right, Hitler could not be expunged from the historical map because of his uniqueness: he must be seen as a part of German, and even of European, history.

This simple revisionist perspective enabled Taylor to go far beyond a condemnation of Hitler and Nazism. If Hitler had a simple “blueprint for aggression,” it ought to have been the task of western statesmen – and a fairly simple one at that – to divine the plan and to wreck it; the “Hitler-blueprint” interpretation made Chamberlain and the other “appeasers” culpable, and let everyone else off the hook. But if Hitler had no plan, just vague wishes and daydreams, it meant that the range of responsibility extended far beyond a few individuals: it would include, in various ways and at different stages, those who believed in collective security in self-determination, in disarmament, in anti-communism. And responsibility is different from guilt: those who believed in alternatives to war and the balance of power were not necessarily weak or evil – most of them genuinely believed that new ways for reconciling differences and righting wrongs had to be found if the world was to avoid a repeat performance of the catastrophe of 1914–18. Taylor attempted to show, against the background of the German drive to domination, how the whole complex of ideas and interests in interwar Europe helped to propel the great powers along the path to war. And it is this complexity – the contingencies, the accidents, the ironies and the paradoxes – that enriches *The Origins of the Second World War* and elevates it to the status it now enjoys as a classic work of historical writing. A work that merely turned Hitler on his head, while it might have enjoyed a brief sensation, would never have inspired the continuing controversy achieved by *Origins*.

Almost overlooked in the furor that its appearance provoked was Taylor’s wider condemnation of the very nature of international politics; but his embittered, disillusioned treatment of politics and statesmanship must surely be one of the clues to his continuing popularity, as disillusionment with the simplicity of Cold-War rhetoric grew throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Reduced to its simplest elements, *Origins* stands as a monumental attack on the way in which the international system works. And Taylor discovered, in Hitler, an ingenious medium through which to launch this attack. All those Taylorian references to affairs before 1919 are intended to demonstrate that matters changed little with the advent of fascism: “Hitler and Mussolini glorified war and the warlike virtues. They used the threat of war to promote their aims. But this was not new. Statesmen had always done it” (p. 136). The balance of power was an endless dance: states have always sought to extend their power, and statesmen everywhere grab every opportunity to aggrandize themselves. The only difference between the fascist dictators and other statesmen was “that their appetite was greater; and they fed it by more unscrupulous means” (p. 140).

Hitler, as Taylor sketches him, was about as evil a man as may be imagined. Even though he acted as a sounding-board for the German nation, he bore the responsibility for the destruction of German democracy, for the concentration camps, and for the extermination of peoples during the Second World War. “He gave orders, which Germans executed, of a wickedness without parallel in civilized history” (p. 27). But in foreign policy Hitler was not unusual: he aimed to make Germany dominant in Europe and, perhaps, in the world. “Other Powers have pursued similar aims and still do. Other Powers treat smaller

countries as their satellites. Other Powers seek to defend their vital interests by force of arms” (p. 27). What does it say about the way in which international affairs are conducted that this personification of wickedness, when regarded from the perspective of traditional European diplomacy, was simply an ordinary statesman going about his business in a time-honored fashion? “In international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German.”

So, in the final analysis, Taylor also chose to turn the interwar years into a morality play. But unlike his predecessors, the play he has written bears the signs of genius: few things are as they appear to the naked eye; honorable intentions lead to tragic conclusions; wicked designs are facilitated by the well-intentioned. His work will surely endure, if only because he rescued this vital part of the human story from the vapid simplicities of good versus evil and returned it to its proper place of complexity and paradox. “Human blunders...usually do more to shape history than human wickedness” (pp. 265–6).

In the past forty years, much has been made of Taylor’s “philosophy of history” – much too much. Taylor himself consistently denied having a philosophy or even a systematic approach. These denials have the ring of truth. In all his work he tried to tell stories, to explain how one thing led to another, to answer the child’s question: “What happened next?” But good stories have something to tell us, just as good jokes tell the truth. Such philosophy as may be found in *Origins* can be summed up as a warning to mistrust historical truths and parallels. We do learn from our mistakes, he says – we learn how to make new ones. The attempt to extract simple policies from the lessons of the 1930s was one of the enemies of clear thinking in the period that followed the Second World War: Munich and the argument over appeasement supplied “superficial parallels and superficial terms of abuse.”¹⁵ A conciliatory policy towards Russia “would not be rejected so firmly now were it not for the recollection of the appeasement towards Germany that failed a decade ago.”¹⁶ This warning against the historical clichés offered up by historians and statesmen is as valuable a message today as it was when first uttered.

These new essays on the origins of the Second World War are designed neither to honor A. J. P. Taylor nor to replace him. They undoubtedly testify to his influence. If anyone is to hold the first-mortgage on the subject, we are fortunate that that person should be someone able to write vigorous prose and to stimulate debate – even among those not yet born when the book was written. But Taylor has claimed that in writing *Origins* he wished to examine events in detail, and the details of what happened behind the scenes are available to us today in a way that was almost unimaginable when it was written. Not surprisingly, the specialists contributing to this edition, having had the opportunity to examine these events in great detail, have found much in his book that requires revision or reconsideration. They have found that some of the charges leveled at Taylor twenty-five years ago, especially those of contradiction and overstatement, were justified. They have also found that he made mistakes and overlooked material available to him, that he sometimes guessed wrong or allowed prejudice to blind him.

Nevertheless, one is left with the distinct impression that Taylor will continue to be read and re-read with interest and profit for decades to come. These essays have been collected with that premise in mind: to contribute to the ongoing debate by clarifying vital aspects of Taylor's interpretation, by synthesizing the work that has been done over the past quarter-century, and by offering fresh evaluations of major themes connected with the origins of the Second World War. This book is intended not to signal the end of the debate but to show where it stands today, and where new discoveries are being made.

Notes

- 1 I wish to express my gratitude to Kathy Burk for allowing me to read the early chapters of her forthcoming biography. Although she had not yet reached the post-1961 controversy in her writing, she assures me that nothing I say here will be contradicted by her!
- 2 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 190. All references in this essay are to the Penguin paperback edition, which includes the 1963 Foreword, "Second thoughts."
- 3 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, Oxford, 1954, p. 5.
- 4 A. J. P. Taylor, *Rumours of Wars*, London, 1952, p. 25.
- 5 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Italian Problem in European Diplomacy 1847-1849*, Manchester 1934, pp. 236-42.
- 6 Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. 324.
- 7 Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. 61.
- 8 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918*, London, 2nd edn, 1948, pp. 34, 56.
- 9 Taylor, *Habsburg Monarchy*, p. 232.
- 10 Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. xix.
- 11 Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery*, p. 294.
- 12 A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck*, London, 1955, p. 272.
- 13 Taylor, *Habsburg Monarchy*, p. 230.
- 14 Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 268.
- 15 Taylor, *Rumours of Wars*, p. 76.
- 16 Taylor, *Rumours of Wars*, p. 80.

2 1918 and after

The postwar era

Sally Marks

The controversy over A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* centered on the prewar years and the outbreak of war. Taylor's dissent from the assumption that Adolf Hitler was the primary cause and his views on appeasement angered many, generating a debate on certain issues. Were Taylor's critics blinded by a conviction that Hitler caused the Second World War? Regarding other leaders of the 1930s, did Taylor equate ineptitude or error with evil? Above all, did Hitler "plan" the Second World War? On another level, Taylor was charged with abuse and misuse of documentation, dismissal of evidence, contradiction, overstatement, a narrow focus on diplomacy, and ignoring fundamental causes.¹

In the uproar, another question bearing on fundamental causes was ignored: how sound are his early chapters addressing the pre-Hitler period? Taylor would argue, and few historians now disagree, that the reasons for the Second World War did not suddenly emerge in 1935 or 1936. After all, Hitler gained power in the Weimar Republic because many Germans thought he could resolve their discontents. His first success, in 1930, came during a recession but in an election dominated by foreign policy, though many grievances about the Versailles treaty had been partially or fully resolved. So why did his foreign policy have such appeal? Taylor dismisses this problem by claiming Hitler's policy was that of his predecessors,² but he also asserts that the entire interwar period forms a unit and that events at the end of the first war were vital in provoking the second. Certainly, what happened in 1918–19 affected what came after, especially in forming the attitudes of most Germans, and Eugen Weber claims "the 1930s begin in August 1914."³ Thus, Taylor's early chapters on the failure to solve what he calls "the German problem" warrant examination.

Characteristically, Taylor starts with the balance of power. The unification of Germany created a great nation in Europe's center but one soon balanced by a Russo-French alliance. Even so, Germany nearly won the First World War. In early 1918, it was triumphant in the east and undefeated in the west, where an impasse existed in France. Yet by November, Germany had lost the war in the west. However, the armistice and peace treaty permitted it to remain a major entity only somewhat diminished in a Europe providing fewer neighboring checks upon it. This implied, after a period of recovery and of breaking treaty restrictions, potential renewed German continental dominance. Some, including