

- France: French military policy, the UK land contribution and strategy towards Germany, 1935-1939", unpublished doctoral thesis, (Oxford University, 1982), p. 325.
- 45 Conference paper by Lt.-Col. Robert Doughty, "French mechanized forces: the tank as an infantry-support weapon", presented to the Northern Great Plains History Conference, September 1983, p. 1.
- 46 Taylor, "Second Thoughts", p. 19.
- 47 Serge Bernstein, "La perception de la puissance par les partis politiques français en 1938-1939", in *La Puissance en Europe*, pp. 294-5.
- 48 The following articles appear in a single issue of *relations Internationales*, no. 33 (Spring 1983) addressed to "Images de la France en 1938-1939": Christine Seffin, "Les manuels scolaires et la puissance française", pp. 103-11; Rémy Pithon, "Opinions publiques et représentations culturelles face aux problèmes de la puissance. Le témoignage du cinéma français 1938-1939", pp. 91-101; Antoine Mares, "Puissance et présence culturelle de la France. L'exemple du Service des Œuvres françaises à l'Étranger dans les années 30", pp. 65-80.
- 49 Robert Frank, "Les attachés financiers et la perception de la puissance en 1938-1939", *ibid.*, pp. 23-32; Claude Lévy, "L'image de la puissance française dans un hebdomadaire dépolitisé: *Martonne*", *ibid.*, pp. 113-21.
- 50 See Elisabeth du Réau, "Effieux stratégiques et redéploiement diplomatique français: novembre 1938-septembre 1939", *Relations Internationales*, no. 35, (Automne 1983), pp. 319-35.
- 51 Duroselle, *Détachant*, ch. 12-13. In recent years Professor A. P. Adamthwaite has developed one of the most intriguing interpretive possibilities, one which combines a renewed assertion of French independence and initiative with a perceived goal of appeasement rather than resistance. See his "France and the coming of war" in *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement*, pp. 246-56; his "War origins again", *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 1984), pp. 100-15; and his earlier book, *France and the Coming of the Second World War* (London, 1977).
- 52 Taylor, "Second Thoughts", p. 26.
- 53 See the fine study of Maurice Vaisse, *Sécurité d'abord. La politique française en matière de désarmement, 9 décembre 1930-17 avril 1934* (Paris, 1981). See also his "Against appeasement: French advocates of firmness, 1933-1938", in *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement*.
- 54 Taylor, "Accident prone", p. 17.

Hitler's Foreign Policy

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The very fact that the present volume of essays has been prepared to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of A. J. P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* attests to the impact of the book on historical thinking and its importance for all subsequent considerations of the subject. One may disagree with those admirers of Taylor who regard him as England's greatest living historian, but there can be no argument that he is one of the most provocative and controversial. And in none of his many works did he set forth more provocative ideas than in the book under discussion.

It is a brilliant book, filled with astute observations and insights, with challenges to conventional wisdom in almost every line. It is also a very readable book, in part because it is so controversial, for it constantly prods the assumptions of its readers, stirring up annoyance, argument — and upon occasion, admiration. It has compelled every student of the Nazi era to re-examine his own views about the subject, and over the years some of the ideas once considered controversial have become part of the conventional wisdom.

Taylor professes to be unhappy with his acceptance into the realm of conventional wisdom. In his memoirs he observes that *Origins* "despite its defects, has now become the new orthodoxy, much to my alarm". He denies, however, that his book has the qualities I have described above and which most of his colleagues have attributed to it. "Where others see it as original and provocative, I find it simply a careful scholarly work, surprising only to those who had never been faced with the truth before."¹ Taylor's work may be scholarly, but it is not careful, and much of it remains surprising to other historians, many of them as scho-

larly as Taylor and considerably more careful, who have arrived at very different interpretations of the "truth". For, contrary to what Taylor may think, much of *Origins* has not become part of the new orthodoxy, and the parts of the book which continue to be most vigorously contested are those which aroused most controversy in the first place, namely his theories about the subject of the present essay, Hitler's foreign policy.

In *Origins*, Taylor challenges the interpretation of other historians who based their views about Hitler's foreign policy, at least in part, on documents presented in evidence at the Nuremberg trials. He points out, quite correctly, that these documents were "loaded" and he maintains, without bothering to prove his point, that scholars who relied on them had found it impossible to escape from the load with which they were charged.² Taylor's method of escaping from that load was to ignore these documents altogether, and at the same time he cavalierly disregarded a great deal of other evidence which did not happen to fit with his own theories. Every historian, of course, is compelled to be selective in his use of evidence. The great weakness of Taylor's book, especially his treatment of Hitler's foreign policy, is the perverse nature of his selectivity and his deliberate rejection of much of the thoroughly reliable evidence on which the theories of many of his colleagues are based. An even graver weakness is that Taylor's own theories are frequently inconsistent and contradictory.

He rejects the Nazi claim that the formation of a Hitler government in January 1933 was a seizure of power, but he challenges the views of other historians as to why and how Hitler came to power. "Whatever ingenious speculators, liberal or Marxist, might say, Hitler was not made Chancellor because he would help the German capitalists to destroy the trade unions, nor because he would give the German generals a great army, still less a great war . . . He was not expected to carry through revolutionary changes in either home or foreign affairs. On the contrary the conservative politicians . . . who recommended him to Hindenburg kept the key posts for themselves and expected Hitler to be a tame figurehead." These expectations were confounded, Taylor says, for Hitler proved to be the most radical of revolutionaries. He made himself all-powerful dictator, destroyed political freedom and the rule of law, transformed German economics and finance, abolished the individual German states, and made Germany for the first time a united country.

In one sphere alone, Taylor says, Hitler changed nothing. "His foreign policy was that of his predecessors, of the professional diplomats at the foreign ministry, and indeed of virtually all Germans. Hitler, too, wanted to free Germany from the restrictions of the [Versailles] peace treaty; to restore a great German army; and then to make Germany the greatest power in Europe from her natural weight." The only difference between Hitler and "virtually all Germans" were occasional differences in emphasis. Two paragraphs later, however, Taylor informs us that Hitler's foreign policy did in fact differ from that of at least some of his predecessors, for Hitler did not attempt to revive the "world policy" which Germany had pursued before 1914, he made no plans for a great German battle fleet, he did not parade a grievance about lost colonies except to embarrass the British, and he was not at all interested in the Middle East. Taylor concludes that "the primary purpose of his policy, if not the only one" was expansion into eastern Europe.

With that Taylor is saying that the differences between Hitler's foreign policy and that of his predecessors were in fact far more significant than mere matters of emphasis. He then goes on to describe precisely that quality which distinguished Hitler most radically not only from his predecessors but from all other ordinary statesmen. "The unique quality in Hitler was the gift of translating commonplace thoughts into action . . . The driving force in him was a terrifying literalism." There was nothing new about denunciations of democracy; it took Hitler to create a totalitarian dictatorship. There was nothing new about anti-Semitism; it took Hitler to push anti-Semitism to the gas chambers. "It was the same with foreign policy. Not many Germans really cared passionately and persistently whether Germany again dominated Europe. But they talked as if they did. Hitler took them at their word. He made the Germans live up to their professions, or down to them — much to their regret."

More careful scholars may deplore Taylor's tendency to assume a knowledge of what "not many Germans" cared for, and with what intensity, and his own frequent inconsistencies on that subject, but many historians share his views about the importance of Hitler's terrifying literalism and many had drawn attention to this quality long before the appearance of *Origins*. Taylor, however, always unwilling to be thought in agreement with generally accepted opinions, pours scorn on colleagues who have purported to discover in Hitler's writings and policy statements an exposition of the ideas which he proposed to

translate into action. *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's table talk, the records of his top-secret conferences with his senior aides and officers in which he described his future plans in minute detail — all these revelations of Hitler's thinking are dismissed by Taylor as irrelevant flights of fancy, not to be taken seriously as indications of his true intentions. Writers of great authority, Taylor says, have seen in Hitler a system-maker who from the first deliberately prepared a great war that would make him master of the world. Taylor rejects such theories with some contempt. In his opinion, statesmen are too absorbed by events to follow a preconceived plan; such plans are in reality the creation of historians, and the systems attributed to Hitler are really those of Trevor-Roper, Elizabeth Wiskemann, and Alan Bullock. Taylor concludes that Hitler did indeed create systems, but these were no more than day-dreams concocted in his spare time.

Taylor attributes much of the success of Hitler's foreign policy to his very lack of preconceptions and prejudices, and cites as examples his willingness to conclude a non-aggression pact with Poland and his disregard of German nationalist sentiment in conceding the South Tyrol to Mussolini to secure Italian friendship. Apart from that, Taylor attributes Hitler's success primarily to his ability to play a waiting game, to take advantage of the offers and opportunities presented to him by his adversaries. Even then Taylor is not sure whether this technique was at first either conscious or deliberate. "The greatest masters of statecraft are those who do not know what they are doing," he says, thereby suggesting that Hitler was both a great master of statecraft and that he did not know what he was doing.³ Yet Taylor has already stated, on the preceding page, that the primary purpose of Hitler's foreign policy was expansion into eastern Europe, and only a few pages later he says that the mainspring of Hitler's immediate policy had been the destruction of the Versailles treaty, although once this objective had been attained he was at a loss of what to do next. As for any long-range plans, Taylor considers it "doubtful whether he had any".⁴

Taylor's inconsistencies continue. Although he states (p. 72) that the primary purpose of Hitler's policy was eastward expansion (which for Hitler meant the acquisition of living space or *Lebensraum*), he then denies (p. 105) that Hitler's desire for *Lebensraum* or economic motives in general were a cause of the Second World War. *Lebensraum* did not drive Germany to war, he says. Rather war, or a warlike policy, produced the demand for *Lebens-*

raum. Hitler and Mussolini were not driven by economic motives. Like most statesmen, they had an appetite for successes. They differed from others only in that their appetite was greater and that they fed it by more unscrupulous means. *Lebensraum* in its crudest sense meant a demand for empty space where Germans could settle but, Taylor argues, Germany was not over-populated in comparison with most European countries and there was no empty space in Europe. "When Hitler lamented: 'If only we had a Ukraine . . .', he seemed to suppose that there were no Ukrainians. Did he propose to exploit, or to exterminate them? Apparently he never considered the question one way or the other."⁵

These statements glaringly expose the disastrous consequences of Taylor's refusal to acknowledge the significance of those sources in which Hitler set forth his ideological preconceptions and revealed his long-range plans based upon them. For Hitler had considered the question of what to do about the Ukrainians; he *did* propose to exploit or exterminate them — and all other non-Aryan peoples in eastern Europe besides. These plans were set forth in detail in *Mein Kampf*, and Hitler continued to expound them in almost identical terms in subsequent policy statements before and during the war. In rejecting the evidence of such policy statements, Taylor misses the absolutely fundamental point of Hitler's foreign policy — the nature of the literalism which he proposed to translate into practice.

Taylor recognizes that when Germany actually conquered the Ukraine in 1941, Hitler and his henchmen tried both methods, exploitation and extermination, but he comments that neither method brought them any economic advantages.⁶ Here again Taylor completely misses the point. Hitler was not primarily concerned with any immediate economic advantage — in 1941 he still thought Russia could be conquered within weeks, and when it became obvious that this would not be possible it was too late to reverse his policies even if he wanted to do so, which he did not. The primary purpose of Hitler's foreign policy and his fundamental aim in the Second World War was the realization of his long-range plan for the acquisition of *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe which was to ensure the security and well-being of the German people for all time. As he specifically declared in *Mein Kampf* and subsequent policy statements, this conquest of territory should not include the conquest of people and the absorption of non-Aryans into the Germanic empire, for such absorption would dilute the purity of Germanic blood and

thereby weaken the Germanic peoples. It was for this reason that the non-Aryans would have to be eliminated. This was the policy Hitler and his henchmen actually introduced in Russia after 1941, a policy which, as Taylor correctly says, brought them no economic advantage. On the contrary, the economic consequences of that policy, not to mention the moral, political and military consequences, were disastrous and contributed significantly to Germany's ultimate defeat. This policy, like the extermination of the Jews, cannot be equated with that of other statesmen with a mere appetite for success. It was the policy of a fanatic ideologue who ignored sober calculations of national interest in order to put his manic ideas into practice.

Taylor's belief that Hitler was simply a political opportunist without long-range purposes remains a central theme of his chronicle and analysis of the actual course of Hitler's foreign policy, in which he continues to present us with inconsistencies and contradictions. In his discussion of the annexation of Austria, for example, Taylor concedes that Hitler "certainly meant to establish control over Austria", but he believes that the way in which this came about was for him a tiresome accident, "an interruption of his long-term policy" (whereby Taylor seems to admit that there was in fact a long-term policy.) At the same time he dismisses as a myth the theory that Hitler's seizure of Austria was a deliberate plot, devised long in advance. "By the *Anschluss* — or rather by the way in which it was accomplished — Hitler took the first step in the policy which was to brand him as the greatest of war criminals. Yet he took this step unintentionally. Indeed he did not know that he had taken it."⁷

Taylor is absolutely correct in saying that the way the *Anschluss* took place was to a large extent accidental and improvised, and that it was not carried out in accordance with a strategy prepared long in advance. In the *Anschluss* crisis, Hitler's hand was forced by the actions of others and he took the final step of actually incorporating Austria into the Reich only when the events of the *Anschluss* convinced him he could afford to do so. But to say that he took this step unintentionally, or did not know he had taken it, is nonsense. On the first page of *Mein Kampf* and in numerous subsequent policy statements, Hitler declared that the incorporation of Austria into the Reich was the primary immediate objective of his policy, and the documentary evidence leaves no doubt whatever that the annexation of Austria was indeed a deliberate plot, prepared long in advance, and that it was conceived as the first step in the domination of eastern Europe.

In his analysis of the *Anschluss* and all other episodes in Hitler's foreign policy, Taylor challenges the theory that Hitler was operating according to a carefully prepared blueprint and timetable. Taylor's emphasis on the accidental and improvised quality in Hitler's actual execution of his policies is valid, but in tilting against the blueprint or timetable theories he seems to be setting up straw men in order to knock them down. It is true that some historians have written about blueprints and timetables, but even the most extreme champions of blueprint-timetable theories never suggested that Hitler had precisely conceived plans for every step of his expansionist policy and a precise timetable for carrying them out. Obviously he had to improvise, to take into account the constant fluctuations in the political scene, and to adjust to the moves of his opponents. All the blueprint-timetables people were saying was that Hitler had precisely defined war aims, primarily the conquest of *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe, that he had detailed plans for carrying them out, and that there was an uncanny consistency between the ideas expressed in his prewar policy statements and the policies he actually put into effect.

When *Origins* was first published, much of the critical wrath directed against the book (and in certain quarters, much of the critical approval it received) was aroused by the belief that Taylor was defending Hitler. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In saying that in foreign policy alone Hitler changed nothing, that his foreign policy was that of his predecessors "and indeed of virtually all Germans", he is not defending Hitler. Instead he is equating Hitler with "virtually all Germans", as he makes clear in a later edition of *Origins*. "Most of all, [Hitler] was the creation of German history and of the German present. He would have counted for nothing without the support and cooperation of the German people . . . Hitler was a sounding-board for the German nation. Thousands, many hundred thousand, Germans carried out his evil orders without quail or question." And he concludes: "In international affairs there was nothing wrong with Hitler except that he was a German."⁸

With that Taylor reverts to the line adopted in his wartime book, *The Course of German History*, which some of his admirers have excused as a regrettable wartime polemic but which Taylor himself stoutly defended in a new preface to that book when it was republished in 1962, the year after the publication of *Origins*. In this preface he explains that his book had proved unaccept-

able to its original sponsors because it failed to show that Hitler was a bit of bad luck in German history and that all Germans, apart from a few wicked men, were bubbling over with enthusiasm for democracy, Christianity, or some other noble cause which would turn them into acceptable allies once we had liberated them from their tyrants. Not so, says Taylor. The entire course of German history "shows that it was no more a mistake for the German people to end up with Hitler than it is an accident when a river flows into the sea. . . . Nothing, it seems to me, has happened since [i.e., between 1945 and 1962] to disturb the conclusions at which I then arrived." According to Taylor, the 70-80 million Germans have always feared the Slavs, and this fear underlay the Germans' plans for their conquest and extermination. "No German of political consequence thought of accepting the Slavs as equals and living at peace with them" — and Taylor believes the Germans have not changed in this respect.⁹ The Third Reich, he writes in *The Course of German History*, represented the deepest wishes of the German people. "Every German desired the achievement which only total war could give. By no other means could the Reich be held together. It had been made by conquest and for conquest; if it ever gave up its career of conquest it would dissolve." In contrast to the Germans there were the Slavic peoples "with their deep sense of equality, their love of freedom, and their devotion to humanity", under whose auspices, Taylor believes, conditions in eastern Europe have improved immensely since the dark days of German and Magyar domination.¹⁰

Taylor continued to adhere to this interpretation of Germany and the Germans. In a discussion of the German problem as it emerged from the First World War, he writes that there has been an almost universal misunderstanding about the nature of that problem, "a misunderstanding perhaps even shared by Hitler". The Germans desired equality with the victor states, they wanted to cast off restrictions on their national sovereignty imposed by the Versailles treaty, and many non-Germans sympathized with what they regarded as these perfectly legitimate aspirations. But the inevitable consequences of fulfilling those German desires, Taylor says, was that Germany would become the dominant state in Europe. And what this would have meant for Europe can be seen from the German plans for the rearrangement of Europe if they had won the First World War, plans exposed in detail in 1961 and after in the publications of the German historian Fritz Fischer and his school. "It was a

Europe indistinguishable from Hitler's empire at its greatest extent, including even a Poland and a Ukraine cleared of their native inhabitants. Hitler was treading, rather cautiously, in Bethmann's footsteps. There was nothing new or unusual in his aims or outlook."¹¹ Taylor thus endorses the most extreme interpretations of Fischer and his followers who, with virtually unrestricted access to German archival records following Germany's defeat in the Second World War, put together a monumental collection of policy statements and speculations about German diplomatic and military goals drawn up by German leaders from every walk of life before and during the First World War.

Taylor and the more extreme representatives of the Fischer school may be right in assuming that a German government victorious in the First World War would have behaved exactly as Hitler did in the Second World War, or worse. The only record we have of a German government's actual treatment of Slavs, however, is that of Prusso-German rule over those segments of Poland taken by Prussia in the eighteenth-century partitions of Poland, at which time, it will be recalled, Slavic Russia took the lion's share. The Prusso-German treatment of the Poles has often been criticized, and with good reason, but during the entire period of German rule over the Poles there was never any suggestion of an attempt to exterminate them. What the Germans were trying to do was to Germanize them, and with notable lack of success.¹² It was Hitler, and only Hitler, who attempted to rectify what he regarded as this mistaken policy of Germanization through extermination — and not at all cautiously, either.

In the years since the Second World War, the United States seems to have replaced Germany as Taylor's principal political bugbear, and although he is not uncritical of the Soviet Union, he has complacently accepted that state's assumption of the role of protector and spokesman of the Slavic peoples and all other nationalities of Eastern Europe. "I had not the slightest illusion about the tyranny and brutality of Stalin's regime," Taylor writes in his memoirs. "But I had been convinced throughout the nineteen thirties that Soviet predominance in eastern Europe was the only alternative to Germany's and I preferred the Soviet one. Moreover I believed that East European states, even when under Soviet control, would be preferable to what they had been between the wars, as has proved to be the case. Hence Soviet ascendancy of eastern Europe had no perils for me." Taylor defends the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia and the

Russian suppression of the Hungarian revolution. "Better a Communist regime supported by Soviet Russia . . . than an anti-Communist regime led by Cardinal Mindszenty. Hence my conscience was not troubled by the Soviet intervention." Taylor's conscience was similarly untroubled when it was learned that the British art historian Anthony Blunt had spied for the Russians, and he successfully opposed Blunt's expulsion from the British Academy.¹³ In notable contrast to this attitude towards the Russians, Taylor has condemned almost every act of American foreign policy. At the time of the Korean war, Taylor, who claims to have been a staunch opponent of appeasement in the 1930s, declared appeasement to be "the noblest word in the diplomat's language."¹⁴ "Even now," he wrote in 1956, "which of us on the Left could say, hand on heart, that in a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union our individual sympathies would be with the United States?"¹⁵

Such comments aroused consternation among many Americans and their British friends, and they were clearly intended to do so. For in his most recent books, as in *Origins* and indeed all his works, Taylor continues to play the role of gaddy, often striking out wildly and unfairly but often telling us unpalatable truths which other commentators lack the imagination to perceive or the audacity to express. In this essay I have not been sparing of my criticism of Taylor. I find many of his ideas ridiculous and his prejudices downright shameful for a historian, and I am irritated by his persistent efforts to surprise and confound his readers. Yet he has always been and he remains one of the most stimulating and readable of historians, whose great contribution is not his own scholarship but his challenges to the values and assumptions of his audience. In response to critics of *Origins* who accused him, quite mistakenly, of failing to condemn Hitler's criminality with sufficient vigor, Taylor confessed that he himself could not get it out of his head that Hitler was an indescribably wicked man. "But this is because I belonged to his generation. He was as wicked as he could be. But he was only a beginner. The rulers of the United States and of Soviet Russia are now cheerfully contemplating a hideous death for seventy million people or perhaps a hundred and fifty million people in the first week of the next war. What has Hitler to show in comparison with this? I think we had better leave Hitler's immorality alone as long as we go clanking around with nuclear weapons."¹⁶

As the preparation of the present volume reminds us, the publi-

cation of *The Origins of the Second World War* aroused enormous furor in the historical profession and provoked a reconsideration of the policies of all the major powers involved. So far as Hitler's foreign policy was concerned, the principal historical debate set off by Taylor's book was whether, as the Nuremberg prosecution and numerous historians maintained, his policy was dedicated to the achievement of long-range objectives, his strategy and tactics worked out long in advance; or whether, as Taylor contended, Hitler was an opportunist and improviser who took advantage of the accidental shifts in the international situation and the mistakes of his opponents. Taylor says that this debate is now sterile, but in stirring it up in the first place he compelled many historians to revise or modify their views and to recognize how much of Hitler's foreign policy was in fact improvised and opportunistic. Moreover, although the debate as originally formulated may be sterile, it remains central to controversies over Hitler's policies in general despite changes in the terminology employed, differences in emphasis, and the introduction of new varieties of evidence.

Because of the sheer amount of historical literature dealing with Hitler's foreign policy that has been produced during the past quarter century, it is manifestly impossible to provide an adequate evaluation of the individual works representing the various schools of thought on the subject in the scope of a brief essay — a mere list of such works would fill a substantial volume. I have therefore confined myself to a short survey of what appear to me to be the principal lines of interpretation and controversy.¹⁷

Let me dispose at once of the small group of writers who seek to defend Hitler, who represent him as a man of peace who sought only justice and equality for Germany, as the hapless victim of the implacable hostility of Germany's enemies and of Bolshevik-Jewish-Capitalist conspiracies. Taylor describes one of these apologies as a "perfectly plausible book," which it is not.¹⁸ Moreover, all such works are characterized by flagrant misrepresentations or outright falsifications of the evidence and do not deserve to be considered in a discussion of serious historical scholarship.

Apart from the old and neo-Nazi, those writers bearing the heaviest and most obvious ideological burden are the members of the Soviet and East European school of thought, which has been joined by a number of Marxists and other left-wing intellectuals in the West. This group represents Hitler, Nazism, and

fascism in general as the products and instruments of capitalist-imperialist society, and the Second World War as a Western-capitalist conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union. From this school we hear nothing about the Anglo-French guarantees to Poland in 1939 or the Hitler-Stalin pact, but much about appeasement which is generally interpreted as a diplomatic maneuver to direct Nazi aggression against Russia. Proceeding from these assumptions, the members of this school have no trouble finding and interpreting evidence which proves their case.

Theoretically akin to the East Europeans and their adherents, but on the whole far more honest in their use of evidence and imaginative in the questions they raise, are the members of what might be called the "fundamental forces" school of thought. These scholars regard Hitler and the Nazi movement as the products of fundamental forces in German political, economic, and social life, and of the institutions, modes of thought, and behavioral patterns developed in the course of the German historical experience. In their basic assumptions, the members of this school are thus in general agreement with Taylor, especially his *Course of German History*, but they have gone far beyond his simplistic explanations and generalizations. In their own search for explanations of the Hitler phenomenon, they have produced many profound and original studies of German life and society, and altogether they have enormously enriched our understanding of German history and institutions. There is nevertheless a certain uniformity and even sterility about their work. In proceeding from the assumption that Hitlerism was a product of fundamental forces in German history, they tend to search for and focus on those aspects of the German past which can be interpreted as being precursors of the Nazi movement. In the process they frequently ignore the contemporary circumstances in which those policies were conceived and conducted, or fail to take adequate account of the differences in values and attitudes of earlier epochs. And because their research is dedicated to discovering those qualities in German life that produced Hitler, the lines of their research as well as their conclusions are to a large extent predetermined.

Inseparable from the "fundamental forces" school, but requiring special mention because of its importance in contemporary German historiography, is the "continuity" school of German history. The members of this group differ from the "fundamental forces" scholars in their special emphasis on the

consistency in the aims and methods of German leaders, and in their efforts to demonstrate that the policies of Hitler were a continuation of policies already pursued or planned by the rulers of Austria, Prussia, Imperial Germany, and Weimar. They too are thus in basic agreement with the Taylor thesis about German history, and in their research they have discovered an enormous quantity of evidence to substantiate that thesis. But, as in the case of the "fundamental forces" school, the results of that research is to a large extent predetermined, and as one recent critic has commented, "with the exercise of a little ingenuity almost anything can be fitted into this concept".¹⁹

To be fair to the "fundamental forces-continuity" historians, they do not all share the view that the Germans are invested with a particularly heavy dose of original sin. A number of them stress the importance of the peculiar nature of the German historical experience, the devastating effects of the Thirty Years War, and the more lasting effects of the treaties of Westphalia ending that war which sanctioned permanent French and Swedish interference in German affairs and for over two centuries halted German national development. Others have drawn attention to the importance of geographical factors, the position of the Germans in central Europe between the French in the west and the Slavs in the east, the Germans' lack of readily defensible or even definable frontiers and their consequent emphasis on the need for a strong army.

Opposed to both the "fundamental forces" and "continuity" schools are historians who refuse to accept the theory that Hitler was an inevitable product of German history or that his policies were simply the continuation of policies of earlier German leaders. Instead they regard him as a unique phenomenon in the German historical experience, and his regime and its bestial policies as a disastrous deviation from the main lines of German history. Members of this "discontinuity" school are of course unable to deny the existence of continuity, for all history is a continuous process, but they contend that both Hitler's domestic and foreign policies represented departures from previous German political and diplomatic traditions. This was particularly true of his foreign policy which, unlike all previous German foreign policies, was consciously based on racist ideology, conducted with revolutionary methods and dedicated to the realization of unlimited aims. "Discontinuity" historians concede that other German leaders and many ordinary Germans were anti-Semitic (as were the leaders and peoples of many other

nations), but they insist that only Hitler advocated and actually attempted to carry out the total extermination of the Jews; other German leaders may have desired the acquisition of additional territories in Europe or overseas, but only Hitler conducted a war of conquest which involved the removal or extermination of the indigenous population.

Members of the "discontinuity" school, with their interpretation of Hitler as a unique phenomenon in German history, have been accused of attempting to exonerate the German people as a whole from blame for the Nazi experience, and the arguments of some of them are certainly intended to achieve this purpose. Whatever their motives, the members of the "discontinuity" school cannot avoid dealing with the question of how the German people as a whole accepted Hitler, how so many Germans were able to condone his bestial policies, and how so many were willing to put these policies into effect. Their attempts at explanation often bring them close to the "fundamental forces" school, but with notable differences in emphasis. Whereas the "fundamental forces" historians regard the Nazi experience as the inevitable product of the German past, their opponents contend that it required the demonic genius of a Hitler to mobilize all the most depraved features of German thought and behavior, that his propaganda successfully deceived the German people about his true intentions (as it deceived foreign governments with far better access to information), and that his totalitarian government successfully repressed all movements of dissent.

Into the controversies among the "fundamental forces", "continuity" and "discontinuity" schools fits the debate over the primacy of foreign politics versus the primacy of domestic politics. Is a country's foreign policy based in large measure on foreign political considerations and conducted quasi-independently of domestic affairs? Or is foreign policy conducted primarily in response to domestic problems and pressures? In dealing with Hitler's foreign policy, scholars who argue in favor of the primacy of foreign policy believe that his domestic program was designed to serve the purposes of his foreign policy; whereas their opponents believe his foreign policy was the product of domestic necessities.

Closely linked with this debate, and more specifically related to the Third Reich, is the controversy between what have been called the "functionalists" and the "intentionalists" (terms which seem to me only to add confusion to the argument.) The

"functionalists" agree fundamentally with the primacy of domestic politics viewpoint. They contend that Nazi foreign policy was far more the outcome (function) of domestic dynamics and crises within Hitler's Germany than the result of rational planning, that it was the result of the frantic but completely uncoordinated activity of competing power groups which produced a progressive radicalization of their measures. The "functionalists" emphasize the polycentric nature of the Nazi government and argue that Hitler, far from being an all-powerful dictator and decision-maker, was on the contrary a weak leader who pursued radical programs to ward off the rivalry of his associates and to escape from the realities of his own weakness. The "intentionalists"; on the other hand, believe that Hitler himself made the major foreign policy decisions of the Nazi state, that he pursued politically intelligible goals, and that the best way to understand the foreign policy of the Third Reich is to understand the personality of Hitler and his ideology.

In their theoretical conceptions at any rate, the "fundamental forces" school and the "functionalist" historians deny the importance of the personal qualities of Hitler and in effect they are saying that if Hitler had not appeared on the German political scene, his place would have been filled by a Müller or a Schmidt. Their arguments are ingenious and they have contributed much to our understanding of the internal dynamics of the Third Reich, but they have obviously not convinced most scholars dealing with the Nazi question if one is to judge by the volume of research devoted to the background, personality and ideas of Hitler, or by the central position Hitler continues to occupy in virtually all studies of the Nazi state.

What is surprising, in view of the controversy aroused by Taylor's book and the immense amount of research devoted to the Nazi question since its publication, is how little the fundamental lines of interpretation and argument have in fact changed, and to what extent historians are still at a loss to explain the Nazi phenomenon. This situation may be observed in numerous works that have been published analyzing or reviewing interpretations of the Nazi question.²⁰ The most recent of these is by the German scholar Eberhard Jäckel. His *Hitler in History* summarizes the results of the latest research and comes to conclusions with which I agree on the whole and which I would like to use as a vehicle for conveying my own views.²¹

Jäckel makes the same point as Taylor that Hitler was not the

pawn of big business, the Junkers, the army, or other established vested interests in Germany. Representatives of these interests recommended his appointment to Hindenburg in order to make use of the popular support he enjoyed, confident that they could control and manipulate him. Instead Hitler used the power conferred upon him to establish his totalitarian state. Those vested interests that did not seem a threat to his authority and which co-operated with his policies were absorbed into his political and social system, but he disregarded them completely in making all major policy decisions.²²

It is over the question of Hitler's policies and their implementation that Jäckel, and I believe most historians who have worked through the evidence, would disagree with one of Taylor's most provocative points, namely that Hitler did not know what he was doing and merely took advantage of the opportunities presented to him by his opponents (although as mentioned earlier, Taylor himself is not altogether consistent on this point). Jäckel, who has written one of the most authoritative books on Hitler's ideology, says about this question: "Perhaps never in history did a ruler write down before he came to power what he was to do afterward as precisely as did Adolf Hitler. Hitler set himself two goals: a war of conquest and the elimination of the Jews." Jäckel goes on to review Hitler's war plans, the fundamental points of which he had already formulated in the 1920s, and comments:²³

Without knowing his war plans we cannot evaluate how he prepared for, initiated and conducted the war . . . Hitler's ultimate goal was the establishment of a greater Germany than had ever existed before in history. The way to this greater Germany was a war of conquest fought mainly at the expense of Soviet Russia. It was in the east of the European continent that the German nation was to gain living space (*Lebensraum*) for generations to come. This expansion would in turn provide the foundation for Germany's renewed position as a world power. Militarily the war would be easy because Germany would be opposed only by a disorganized country of Jewish Bolsheviks and incompetent Slavs.

Before launching his war of conquest in the east, however, Hitler had to meet certain fundamental preconditions. The first was the consolidation of his authority in Germany and rearmament. The second was to put an end to the possibility of a stab in the back in the west while Germany was at war in the east, for a successful attack on the Rhine-Ruhr industrial areas would deal a mortal blow to Germany's ability to wage war of any kind. France was the only power capable of striking such a blow;

France, therefore, had to be eliminated as a military power before Germany could launch its campaign in the east. To counter the power of France, Hitler hoped to win alliances with Britain, which was to be offered German support to retain its global empire, and with Italy, which was to be offered supremacy in the Mediterranean and assurances of continued control over the South Tyrol, despite that region's large German population. Hitler gained his alliance with Italy but by 1937 he had despaired of winning an alliance with Britain, although at least until 1941 he continued to hope that such an alliance might yet be possible. "Even a cursory glance at the diplomatic and military history of the Third Reich demonstrates that this program served as an outline of those German policies that were defined by Hitler himself," Jäckel says, "and there is ample documentary evidence to prove that he always kept this outline in mind. It was, of course, not a timetable or even a detailed prospectus, but a definite and structured list of objectives, priorities and conditions."²⁴

Jäckel believes that the controversy between the "functionalists" and the "intentionalists" is based on a profound misunderstanding on both sides. "There is abundant evidence", he says, "that all major decisions in the Third Reich were made by Hitler, and there is equally abundant evidence that the regime was largely anarchic and can thus be described as a polycracy. The misunderstanding is to suppose that the two observations are contradictory and that only one of them can be true." Jäckel himself sees no contradiction here. "The monarch comes to power on a polycratic basis, supported by conflicting groups that paralyze each other, and he maintains his power by ruling polycratically -- that is, by playing the conflicting groups against each other. It is precisely this method that permits him to make the major decisions alone."²⁵ The ideas, too, were Hitler's. "He undoubtedly developed a program of his own, individually and alone", Jäckel says, but he goes on to observe that "his program must have coincided with the deeper tendencies and ambitions of his country and of his time. We may not be able to explain this, and yet we have to recognize it. Was he an author or an executor, a producer or a product?"²⁶

In dealing with this question, Jäckel confesses his inability to provide definite answers, and refuses to take refuge in simplistic explanations. "What the fact-bound researcher can state and perhaps explain is only that the governments of the Weimar Republic did not seriously prepare for war, whereas Hitler

did."²⁷ He points out that both the Japanese and Italians preceded the Germans in going to war for imperial reasons in the 1930s, and he might have added that the Poles and Hungarians were happy to join Hitler in the final spoliation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, that the Russians joined in the spoliation of Poland later in that same year and that they went on to take over the Baltic states, Northern Bukovina (at the expense of Romania) and to go to war against Finland. He might have added further that so-called democratic societies have not been altogether pacific in the past, that Britain and France, having acquired the world's largest overseas empires, were hardly in a moral position to point a finger of guilt at peoples (or regimes) which attempted to acquire similar empires, that the Soviet Union continues to control with an iron hand the multitude of national minorities conquered by the regimes of the tsars, and that the United States policy of westward expansion, in the course of which the white man ruthlessly thrust aside the "inferior" indigenous population, served as the model for Hitler's entire concept of *Lebensraum*.

Jäckel makes no attempt to exonerate the Germans. He stresses that they supported Hitler and carried out his criminal orders, and that their support and obedience was voluntary and not the result of terror and repression. Yet he believes "this pessimistic view cannot and should not lead to a blanket moral condemnation of the Germans living at that time, for they were as a whole no worse and no better than the generations before and after them. But they were subjected to ordeals and to temptations that others escaped." Again Jäckel attempts to avoid facile explanations. He is obviously uncomfortable with many of the schools of historical thought discussed earlier in this essay, especially attempts to explain the origins of National Socialism through polemical allusions to one's own political or ideological adversaries. "Such biased efforts are not only unscholarly but in most cases thoroughly contemptible." Jäckel believes it is vital to remember that the vast majority of Germans were denied the kind of information that ordinarily build the foundation of public opinion and that, although we now know that Hitler intended to implement the program presented in such detail in *Mein Kampf*, it is "beyond doubt that the Germans did not grant him power in order to implement that program."²⁸

But then Jäckel plunges into a simplistic explanation of his own and seems to fall squarely into the "fundamental forces" school of thought. Hitler's foreign policy followed a rigid plan,

he says, but that plan "was not wholly incongruent with general developments and its realization was therefore ensured". Later imperialistic territorial conquest was presaged in the development of Germany, just as it was in the development of Japan and Italy. "Thus Hitler, notwithstanding his own great personal responsibility in shaping events, was no more than the executor of a longstanding tendency."²⁹

Here I part company with Jäckel, with whose views I am in almost complete agreement up to this point. All events, of course, are conditioned by the past, but to say that Hitler was no more than the executor of a longstanding tendency, thereby implying that the man and his policies were an inevitable product of German history, seems to me to place a dangerous emphasis on the principle of historical determinism and suggests that there is nothing an individual or nation can do to escape the fate dictated by its heritage.³⁰ To me there is something profoundly unhistorical about the "fundamental forces" school of thought for, by concentrating on problems that apparently foreshadow future developments, the historian may neglect or underestimate the importance of other aspects of a nation's past that may have been far more significant in an earlier age, or at least appeared so to perceptive contemporary observers. Such an approach in effect denies the importance of human beings in history, the role of thinkers, artists, leaders in a people's development, nor does it make sufficient allowance for the many accidents which befall a people (plagues, famines, foreign conquest) which are not necessarily the product of their heritage.

For the study of German history, the inevitability thesis has had the unfortunate result of requiring an emphasis on those features of the German past which seem to have produced the Third Reich and which made Germany different from, and by implication inferior to, more modern, moral and democratic societies. Such an attitude has led to a certain smugness if not to outright racism on the part of many non-Germans (vide Taylor), and to an exaggerated moral self-flagellation on the part of the Germans themselves. It has also contributed to a curiously myopic quality in many works on German history, which by focusing exclusively and obsessively on the problems of Germany and the Germans tend to ignore comparable problems in other societies and fail to take sufficient account of the terrifying universality of the German historical experience. If German history has anything to teach, it is that the venter of civilization

in all societies is perilously thin, and that the qualities we most admire in Western societies are in no way guaranteed by Western traditions, institutions, or national character, but must be safeguarded by eternal vigilance.

NOTES

- 1 A. J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (New York, 1983), p. 235.
- 2 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, first published in 1961. My references are to the American paperback Premier edition (Greenwich, Conn., 1963), p. 19.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp. 69–73.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 107.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 105.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 105.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 146.
- 8 Foreword to a new edition of the *Origins*, "Second Thoughts"; Penguin paperback edition (Harmondsworth, 1961), pp. 26–7.
- 9 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History*, first published in 1945. My references are to the American paperback Capricorn edition (New York, 1962), pp. 7–8.
- 10 *Course of German History*, pp. 213–14, 222.
- 11 A. J. P. Taylor, "War origins again", reprinted from *Past and Present* (April 1965) in E. M. Robertson (ed.), *The Origins of the Second World War: Historical Interpretations* (London, 1971), pp. 139–40. Bethmann was German chancellor at the beginning of the First World War.
- 12 Taylor takes it for granted that Habsburg rule was German, but the Habsburgs made no efforts comparable to those of Prussia to Germanize the Slavs, and Hitler certainly never regarded their policies as a model for his own.
- 13 *Personal History*, pp. 181, 214, 270–1.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 182.
- 15 *New Statesman*, Vol. 52 (1956), pp. 523–4, quoted by John W. Boyer, "A. J. P. Taylor and the art of modern history", *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 49 (March 1977), p. 56.
- 16 "War origins again", p. 138.
- 17 All references to schools of thought must be qualified by observing that there are sharp differences of opinion among scholars who adopt the same general approach to historical problems. For a more detailed survey—analysis of major historical interpretations, see the recent intelligent and level-headed study by John Hiden and John Farguharson, *Explaining Hitler's Germany. Historians and the Third Reich* (Totowa, NJ, 1983).
- 18 "War origins again", p. 138.
- 19 Hiden and Farguharson, *Explaining Hitler's Germany*, p. 56.
- 20 The French scholar Pierre Aycoberry, for example, concludes:

- "One cannot say for certain whether the Third Reich was a radical departure from, or a continuation of preceding regimes. The question remains open, like a gaping hole in the historical consciousness. We still have not settled with the past." (*The Nazi Question. An Essay on the Interpretations of National Socialism, 1922–1975* (New York, 1981), p. 225.) Anthony Adamthwaite, writing in 1984, takes a parallel line. Many interesting questions remain unanswered he says, "but in the last analysis Hitler and Nazism can be understood, interpreted, or used as each generation wishes" ("War origins again", *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 56 (March 1984), p. 114).
- 21 Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler in History* (Hanover, NH, 1984). My own interpretations may be found in "Die Deutsche Frage und der nationalsozialistische Imperialismus: Rückblick und Ausblick", in Josef Becker and Andreas Hillgruber (eds), *Die Deutsche Frage im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1983), pp. 373–92, and in the introductions and conclusions to my two volumes, *Hitler's War Aims*. Vol. 1, *Ideology, the Nazi State and the Course of Expansion*; Vol. 2, *The Establishment of the New Order* (New York, 1973–4).
 - 22 Jäckel, *Hitler in History*, ch. 1.
 - 23 *ibid.*, pp. 23–5.
 - 24 *ibid.*, pp. 25–6.
 - 25 *ibid.*, p. 30.
 - 26 *ibid.*, p. 43.
 - 27 *ibid.*, p. 40.
 - 28 *ibid.*, pp. 90, 94, 96.
 - 29 *ibid.*, p. 104.
 - 30 In an earlier draft of his book, which his publisher kindly sent me for purposes of writing this review article, Jäckel had emphasized the quality of inevitability more specifically. In this draft version he wrote that the realization of Hitler's foreign policy plan was ensured because it "derived from and conformed to" general developments, and that Hitler "was no more than the executor of the inevitable" (rather than merely the executor of a longstanding tendency).