

Historic Potentials: The Question of Inevitability and the Second World War

Stuart Cameron

Dr. Blackler

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the question of whether the Second World War and the Holocaust were inevitable events in European history or were rather possible outcomes of historic potentials which arose before these events. These historic potentials included the aftermath of the First World War, Treaty of Versailles, the concept of self-determination, antisemitism, economic strife, nationalism, and population politics. After the First World War Europe was in turmoil due to the impact of the losses (casualties and resources) caused by the war. The Treaty of Versailles produced ideas of hypocrisy through both the promise and denial of national rights and pre-Armistice agreements. Similarly, the potential of self-determination, “guaranteed” to nations, were denied to other nations thus creating a sense of animosity. Antisemitism created the potential for “willing executioners” of the Holocaust throughout Europe. Economic strife became a dangerous potential, since the global crash during the Great Depression, along with other economic crises in Europe allowed for the possibility of fascist or other totalitarian based groups to rise in Europe since they provided solutions for these crises. Nationalism became a dangerous potential since it allowed for states to define who did or did not belong in the state and “justifying” the persecution of “others.” Lastly, population politics created the possibility for authoritarian leaders to gain power by appealing to large populations of people. Thus, the Second World War and the Holocaust were not inevitable events but were rather outcomes of various dangerous potentials which arose in Europe after the First World War.

Introduction

The benefit of living in the present is that historical events are often over and done with and can be studied with a degree of hindsight. However, a con of studying history from the perspective of the present day is that history appears completely linear with events clearly

following one another or in other words events inevitably lead to the events that follow them. Historical events, such as the Second World War, should not be studied as if they were inevitable occurrences. Rather, they should be viewed as if through the eyes of one living during that time. In other words, history should be studied as if events were only made possible due to various historical potentials. For example, in Europe, the Second World War was made possible through various historical potentials which arose before the beginning of the conflict. These include the effects that the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles had on Europe, the concept of self-determination, antisemitism throughout Europe, economic strife, nationalism, and population politics. Therefore, this paper will discuss whether the Second World War was an inevitable occurrence or a possible outcome of the dangerous potentials which existed in Europe preceding the war. Similarly, this paper will also discuss the inevitability of the Holocaust as well, since it is impossible to discuss the Second World War in Europe without discussing this event in conjunction with the war due to the intertwined nature of these incidents.

Potential 1: Impact of the First World War on Europe

By the end of the First World War in 1918 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Europe was devastated in almost every sector. The reason for this lies within the vast amounts of casualties, resources spent, and destruction caused by the war. In total, over 37 million soldiers were either killed, wounded, taken prisoner or went missing as a result of the War. Germany alone suffered over seven million of the total casualties of the war, with Austria-Hungary suffering similar losses during the war (around 7 million total soldiers killed, wounded, taken prisoner or missing).¹ For Germany, this represented over half of the over 10 million

¹ "World War One: Casualty and Death Tables," The Great War. Resources. WWI Casualties and Deaths | PBS, accessed February 21, 2019, https://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/henson/188/WWI_Casualties%20and%20Deaths%20%20PBS.html.

German soldiers mobilized during the war.² According to Robert Whalen, this massive loss of life during the war not only had great demographic consequences on Germany but also led to subsequent social and cultural consequences as well.³ For example, Whalen states that the social consequences of the war included the vast amounts of disabled veterans, orphans, and widows which the new financially unstable Weimar government needed to provide care for the foreseeable future.⁴ Whalen also states that the cultural consequences of German losses during the war included cultural consequences included the acculturation of the German people to death on a massive scale.⁵ Thus, in the case of Germany alone, the sheer amount of casualties suffered both created large amounts of persons (wounded, widows, orphans, etc.) who needed the state to care for them, and acclimated the German people to the concept of mass death. This, therefore, made the end of the First World War a dangerous potential since the vast amounts of people lost during the war greatly impacted Germany demographically, socially and culturally.

Not only was the First World War costly in terms of population loss, but also expensive in terms of the heavy financial cost of the war. According to Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, the First World War cost over 125 billion US dollars in net total for the all the Allied Powers (United States, France, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, etc.) combined.⁶ Similarly, Broadberry and Harrison state that the War cost the Central Powers (Germany, Austria Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire), over 60 billion US dollars in net total, with Germany paying

² "World War One: Casualty and Death Tables," The Great War. Resources. WWI Casualties and Deaths | PBS, accessed February 21, 2019, https://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/henson/188/WWI_Casualties%20and%20Deaths%20%20PBS.html.

³ Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 15-19.

⁴ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 49-57, 69-81.

⁵ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 15-19.

⁶ Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, "The Economics of World War 1: A Comparative Quantitative Analysis," University of Warwick, August 2, 2005, 28, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/mharrison/papers/ww1toronto2.pdf>.

approximately 40 billion dollars alone.⁷ Thus, the overall net cost of the First World War rose to approximately 180 billion US dollars in total.⁸ This, therefore, represents a huge financial cost for the nations which participated in the First World War. Thus, the First World War became a dangerous potential since the huge costs of the war impacted the economies of all these nations after the end of the war, especially those, such as Germany, that also lost significant amounts of people due to the war.

Potential 2: The Treaty of Versailles and Hypocrisy

However, the severe losses, both financial and human were not the only dangerous potential to arise out of the end of the First World War. Another dangerous potential included the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles, which was signed in 1919 by the victorious (Allies) and losing (Central) powers, was the outcome of the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and sought to bring about an end to the conflict and establish a lasting “peace” throughout the world.⁹ However, the document was unequivocally one-sided in its nature, with most if not all of the provisions laid out in the treaty benefitting the “Big Three.”¹⁰ This document represented a dangerous potential in Europe for several reasons. One factor which made the treaty of Versailles a dangerous potential was the severe treatment of Germany by the “Big Three” (US, France, and Britain) through the blunting of German economic, military and political (territorial) power. However, the Treaty of Versailles not only treated Germany unfairly but other Allied nations, such as Italy, faced unfair treatment through the denial of pre-Armistice promises.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Treaty of Versailles," Encyclopædia Britannica, March 14, 2019, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

One form of punishment placed on Germany stemmed from Article 231 (commonly known as the War Guilt Clause) of the Treaty of Versailles, which placed the blame for the destruction of the war solely on Germany and laid out a set of penalties in the form of war reparations.¹¹ For example, Article 231 stated, “The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.”¹² Similarly, the subsequent Article 232 stated that Germany, “...will make compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers and to their property during the period of the belligerency of each as an Allied or Associated Power against Germany by such aggression by land, by sea and from the air, and in general all damage as defined in Annex I hereto.”¹³ In other words, the Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to pay for all of the damage dealt during the war. According to William Shirer, the reparations that Germany would be forced to pay totaled 132 billion gold marks or approximately 33 billion US dollars, which angered many Germans who believed the vast amount was unpayable.¹⁴ Therefore, the Treaty of Versailles became a dangerous potential since the Treaty blamed Germany for the War and imposed harsh economic reprisals against the nation, thus likely angering many Germans who felt that the treaty was unfair.

¹¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "World War One: Treaties and Reparations," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/world-war-i-treaties-and-reparations>.

¹² "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," Library of Congress, 137-138, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0043.pdf>.

¹³ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 138.

¹⁴ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, 15th ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 51.

The Treaty of Versailles not only targeted Germany economically, but also aimed to restrict Germany militarily. This arose within Articles 159-210 of the Treaty, which forced Germany to disarm their military and placed limitations on the military capabilities of the German military for the foreseeable future.¹⁵ For example, Article 159 states that, "...the total number of effectives in the Army of the States constituting Germany must not exceed one hundred thousand men, including officers and establishments of depots."¹⁶ This represented a vast weakening of the German military since this is a significant reduction compared the approximately 1.9 million troops which constituted the German Army in 1914.¹⁷ Similarly, according to William Shirer, the Treaty of Versailles also forbade Germany from having tanks, an air force and submarines, while also heavily restricting the German navy by restricting the size of vessels which the navy could build.¹⁸ This greatly angered the German populace since, according to Carlos Magaña, the severe cutback of German military forces made Germans feel that their nation would be vulnerable to attack and it went against the idolization of the military which was present in German culture.¹⁹ Therefore, the Treaty of Versailles became a dangerous potential since the military disarmament, like the economic sanctions, angered the German populace who felt that the Treaty weakened Germany to the point where it could no longer defend itself.

Lastly, the Treaty of Versailles also targeted Germany in terms of its international power, i.e. its territory both in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Articles 51-158 of the Treaty dealt

¹⁵ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 115-133.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 115.

¹⁷ John Graham Royde-Smith and Dennis E. Showalter, "World War I," Encyclopædia Britannica, January 09, 2019, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Forces-and-resources-of-the-combatant-nations-in-1914>.

¹⁸ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 58.

¹⁹ Carlos Magaña, "The Versailles Treaty," University of California Santa Barbara, December 15, 2005, accessed March 22, 2019, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/projects/1920s/VersaillesTreatyCarlos.htm>

with the dissolution of German territories/acquisitions, such as Alsace-Lorraine and Poland, within Europe and the entirety of Germany's international empire.²⁰ In Europe, Germany would lose approximately 10 percent of its pre-war territory to France (Alsace-Lorraine), Poland, Denmark, Belgium, and Germany lost all of the territory that Germany took from Russia in 1918, to the newly independent states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.²¹ Along with this Germany lost a large percentage of its coal and iron industries due to the territorial losses enacted by the treaty²² Similarly, Germany lost the entirety of their overseas colonies to the French and the British.²³ Thus, as with the other punishments placed on Germany (Economic and military), Germans were angered by the harsh reprisals placed upon them by the Treaty of Versailles since Germany lost a large percentage of their territory while the Victorious powers gained the territory which Germany lost.

However, Germany was not the only nation treated poorly by the Treaty of Versailles. Another nation which the "Big Three" treated unfairly in the Treaty was Italy, which was one of the "Victorious Powers." The unfair treatment came in the form of the failure of the Treaty to address pre-Armistice agreements made between the Triple Entente (France, Britain and Russia) and Italy. The agreement, known as the Pact/Treaty of London, between these nations mainly dealt with the idea that if Italy joined the War on the side of the Entente (even though Italy was in an alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary) that Italy would be rewarded with territory with large Italian populations, such as the from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.²⁴ However,

²⁰ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 77-115.

²¹ National Archives, "The National Archives Learning Curve | The Great War | Why Was It Hard to Make Peace?" The Great War 1914 to 1918, January 27, 2004, accessed March 22, 2019, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g5/cs2/background.htm>.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Italy Enters World War I," National WWI Museum and Memorial, February 22, 2018, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.theworldwar.org/explore/italy>.

despite these agreements, Italy only gained a small portion of what was promised in their agreement with the Entente Powers thus creating the sense that Italy was “robbed” at the end of the First World War.²⁵ Therefore, the Treaty of Versailles became a dangerous potential because it failed to honor the promises made by Britain and France to Italy, thus likely angering the Italian populace since they felt like they were betrayed by their allies.

Potential 3: Self-Determination

The poor treatment of Germany and other nations, however, was not the only factor of the Treaty of Versailles which became a dangerous potential. Another factor, the concept of self-determination became a potentially dangerous concept in post-World War One Europe. Oxford English Dictionary defines self-determination as, “The process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own government.”²⁶ In other words, self-determination is how a state/nation or the people of that state or nation decide their own statehood and form of government. This concept of self-determination first originated in the 14 Points Speech made by President Woodrow Wilson during 1918, since in his speech Wilson “guaranteed” the independence and rights of autonomy of various nations and peoples, such as Belgium and the peoples of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, throughout Europe.²⁷ Another definition which plays into this concept and was important to the enacting of this idea in post-WWI Europe was homogeneity. According to Oxford English Dictionary, homogeneity is defined as, “The quality or state of being all the same or all of the same kind.”²⁸ Therefore, national homogeneity would be defined as a state whose population consists of the “same” people (i.e. “race” or “ethnicity”).

²⁵ Clara M. Lovett and Giuseppe Di Palma, "Italy," Encyclopædia Britannica, March 20, 2019, accessed March 22, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy/The-cost-of-victory>.

²⁶ "Self-determination | Definition of Self-determination in English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/self-determination>.

²⁷ Woodrow Wilson, "The Fourteen Points Address," address, 1918, in *The Human Rights Reader*, 308-310.

²⁸ "Homogeneity | Definition of Homogeneity in English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/homogeneity>.

The dangerous potential of the concept of self-determination arose due to the subsequent denial of this concept to various nations and peoples around the continent, creating a sense of hypocrisy since other states were accorded these rights by post-War agreements, such as the Treaty of Versailles. Similarly, this concept, along with the concept of homogeneity, had the potential to be used in order to justify violence in order to achieve the unification of an “ethnic” people under a single state.

Firstly, self-determination became a dangerous potential since the Treaty of Versailles and other peace agreements only protected the rights of self-determination for some nations and peoples in Europe and denied this right to others. One example where the right of self-determination was denied to German populations across Europe. This denial came in the form of the dissection of German territory, mentioned in the previous section, and the rejection of the Anschluss (the unification of Germany and Austria into Greater Germany). In the case of Austria, the Article 80 of the Treaty of Versailles states, “Germany acknowledges and will respect strictly the independence of Austria, within the frontiers which may be fixed in a Treaty between that State and the Principal Allied and Associated Powers; she agrees that this independence shall be inalienable, except with the consent of the Council of the League of Nations.”²⁹ In other words, the Treaty of Versailles expressly forbade any form of union between Germany and the German state of Austria. Similarly, the Treaty of Versailles guaranteed the independence of the new state of Czechoslovakia.³⁰ However, within this state were approximately 3 million “ethnic” Germans mostly living in the region known as the Sudetenland.³¹ These both, therefore, represent hypocrisy within the guarantees made by the 14

²⁹ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 87.

³⁰ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 87-89.

³¹ "Crisis in Czechoslovakia," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-7/crisis-czechoslovakia>.

Points and the various peace treaties made after the end of the First World War, since the treaties forbade Germans from making their own unified state and separated “ethnic” German populations across multiple nations.

As stated in the previous section, Italy was another nation which the Treaty of Versailles denied territory after the end of the First World War. Much like Germany, this denial of territory also denied Italy and “ethnic” Italian peoples their rights of self-determination. This in turn, along with the failed promises of territorial gain, allowed for the concept of irredentism to arise within Italy.³² Irredentism, according to Oxford English Dictionary is, “A policy of advocating the restoration to a country of any territory formerly belonging to it.”³³ Therefore, Italian irredentism would be defined as policies which advocated for the restoration/restitution of “Italian” territory back to the control of Italy. Irredentists often focused on the territories within the former Austro-Hungarian empire, including Tyrol, Istria, Gorizia, and Trieste, which all had large or majority Italian populations and were promised to Italy after the end of the First World War by the Treaty of London.³⁴ After the end of the First World War, irredentists claimed that Italy had won a “mutilated” victory since, as stated in the previous section, the agreements made in the Treaty of London were thrown out by the Treaty of Versailles and other peace treaties.³⁵ Therefore, Italian self-determination, was denied since Italy was deprived of the right to unite the “ethnic” Italian populations around Europe.

Another dangerous potential which the concept of self-determination created was the possibility for leaders to use this denial of rights to attain power. For, example, the NSDAP

³² Alan Cassels, "Mussolini's Early Diplomacy," Project MUSE, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1475304>.

³³ "Irredentism | Definition of Irredentism in English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/irredentism>.

³⁴ "Italian Irredentism," International Encyclopedia of the First World War, accessed March 26, 2019, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/italian_irredentism.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

(National Socialist German Workers Party or Nazi) and Adolph Hitler likely gained some popular support since they promised to attain the rights of self-determination for German peoples. This promise appeared in the first point of the Nazi Party Program which states, “We demand the union of all Germans to form a Greater Germany on the basis of the right of self-determination enjoyed by nations.”³⁶ Similarly, in Italy, Mussolini partly was able to attain power due to Italian feelings of resentment towards the “mutilated” victory and the denial of territory around the Adriatic sea.³⁷ In both cases, fascist parties and leaders attracted attention to their parties by directly addressing the hypocrisy within the practice of the concept of self-determination after the First World War and promising to end this hypocrisy if they were able to attain power. Therefore, self-determination became a dangerous potential since it made it possible for extremist parties, including fascists, to use the hypocritical practice of the concept as a platform to gain popularity and power.

Potential 4: Nationalism

Like the concept of self-determination, the concept of nationalism also represented a dangerous potential following the First World War. Nationalism is defined as, “Identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.”³⁸ As with the concept of self-determination, the concept of hegemony played an important role in the formation and practice of nationalism after the First World War. Nationalism, according to Nenad Miscevic often raises the question of who belongs within the state.³⁹ However, since the concept of nationalism questions who belongs within the state, it

³⁶ "The Nazi Party Program, 1920," *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook*, ed. Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 64.

³⁷ Cassels, "Mussolini's Early Diplomacy," <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1475304>.

³⁸ "Nationalism | Definition of Nationalism in English by Oxford Dictionaries," Oxford Dictionaries | English, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nationalism>.

³⁹ Nenad Miscevic, "Nationalism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 15, 2014, accessed March 31, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism/>.

must then also pose the question of who does not belong in the state. Therefore, the idea of nationalism in tandem with the concept of homogeneity define who does and who does not belong in the state. The dangerous potential of nationalism came out of this since the question of who belongs in the state and the inverse question of who does not belong “justified” the persecution of “others” (those who did not belong) in order to reach the goal of homogeneity.

For example, one such example of nationalism, in conjunction with hegemony, allowing for the persecution of minorities occurred in the states of Turkey and Greece in the years following the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference. This persecution took the form of the “population exchanges” (ethnic cleansings) which took place between these two nations directly following the War. According to Taner Akçam, Turkish nationalism and ideas of Turkish hegemony “justified” the ethnic cleansings of Greeks and other Christian populations in Anatolia (Turkey) through forced removal to Greece or outright murder.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Akçam states that Greece and other Balkan states enacted ethnic cleansings against Muslims through either forced migration or murder.⁴¹ In both cases, Akçam states that hundreds of thousands to millions of people were forced to move between the two nations.⁴² Thus, both Greece and Turkey, motivated by nationally fueled ideas of hegemony, enacted ethnic cleansings against minority populations. Therefore, the concept of nationalism in cooperation with the concept of hegemony became a dangerous potential after the First World War since these ideas allowed states to enact ethnic cleansings against the minority populations living in the nation.

Similarly, another example of nationalism, with the concept of hegemony, “justifying” the persecution of minorities occurred in Germany after the rise of the Nazi Party in 1933. This

⁴⁰ Taner Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Holt, 2007), 103-107.

⁴¹ Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 108.

⁴² Akçam, *A Shameful Act*, 103-108.

persecution came in the form of the NSDAP's attempts to separate Jews from German society. One way which the NSDAP disconnected Jews from the rest of society was the denial of German citizenship to Jews. This intent for removal of citizenship is shown point 4 of the program of the NSDAP which stated, "None but members of the nation may be citizens of the state. None but those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be a member of the nation. No Jew therefore may be a member of the nation."⁴³ Along with this, point 5 of the NSDAP program stated that anyone who was not a citizen of Germany living in the nation would be treated as "guests" and under laws which legislated "aliens" (foreigners).⁴⁴ Thus, non-Germans in Germany, regardless of their past status in the state as citizens or not, were treated as foreigners in Germany by the NSDAP. This, in turn, represents the dangerous potential of nationalism since the NSDAP aimed to separate Jews, and other non-German populations within Germany, from German society by denying them the right to citizenship and by treating them legally as foreigners within the state.

Potential 5: Economic Strife

Yet another dangerous potential following the conclusion of the First World War included economic strife both in Weimar Germany and the rest of Europe. In the case of Weimar Germany, the outcomes of the First World War, namely the reparations placed upon the nation by the Treaty of Versailles and the hyperinflationary period, destroyed the post-war German economy. As stated in the second section, the Treaty of Versailles placed approximately 132 billion gold marks or approximately 33 billion US dollars on Germany.⁴⁵ Along with this, the Treaty of Versailles placed a payment schedule and punishments on Germany, if they should fail to pay the reparations on time.⁴⁶ According to Roger Myerson, in 1921 Germany would have to

⁴³ "The Nazi Party Program, 1920," 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 64.

⁴⁵ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 51.

⁴⁶ "Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles)," 137-158.

pay approximately 3 billion gold marks per year, with the price lowered in 1928 to 2 billion per year.⁴⁷ Thus, in an attempt to pay off this debt, the German government began to print more currency in order to raise the funds necessary to make the payments within the timeframe placed on the nation.⁴⁸ However, the constant printing of new currency, in turn, set off a hyperinflationary spiral which completely devalued German currency and caused financial collapse across the nation during the early 1920s.⁴⁹

However, the hyperinflationary crisis was not the only economic disaster which plagued Weimar Germany. The occupation of the Ruhr region of Germany by the French military represented yet another economic crisis which served as a dangerous potential. The Ruhr, itself is a highly industrialized region of Germany, located along the Ruhr River, and served as Germany's main coal and steel production centers.⁵⁰ According to Shirer, by 1922, the Weimar government had asked the Allied powers for a delay for their reparation payments since the value of the mark had already fallen to 400 marks to the (American) dollar.⁵¹ However, the French government refused this delay of payment; and in response to German defaults on payments of resources decided to occupy the industrial Ruhr region of Germany with French forces in 1923.⁵² Along with causing further economic disaster for Germany, the occupation of the Ruhr caused an outcry among Germans both in the Ruhr region and throughout the rest of Germany. This social

⁴⁷ Roger B. Myerson, "Political Economics and the Weimar Disaster," *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (JITE) / Zeitschrift Für Die Gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 160, no. 2 (June 2004): 196, accessed April 8, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uwo.edu/stable/40752453>.

⁴⁸ "German Inflation 1919-1923," The National Library of Israel, accessed April 08, 2019, <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/collections/personalsites/Israel-Germany/Weimar-Republic/Pages/Inflation.aspx>.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Ruhr," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, June 25, 2018, accessed April 08, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ruhr>.

⁵¹ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 61.

⁵² *Ibid*, 61.

outrage took the forms of strikes, guerrilla war, and sabotage against the French, who in response countered with arrests and death sentences.⁵³

These economic crises represented a dangerous potential since they affected the lives of many ordinary German citizens and their outlooks regarding the Weimar government. One set of ordinary Germans, according to Robert Whalen, which were greatly affected by the economic crises included veterans, namely veterans of the First World War, and their families. According to Whalen, veterans and their families (and the families of those killed or wounded during the First World War) were affected by the hyperinflationary crisis through the destruction of the pension system.⁵⁴ Whalen states that the pension system collapsed due to the stresses caused by both the immense amount of people relying on the system, as well as the fragile nature of the system in the face of the economic crisis of the early 1920s.⁵⁵ The collapse of the system, in turn, caused many war veterans and their families to view the Weimar system as insufficient in caring for their needs.⁵⁶ Another part of the ordinary German population affected by this economic crisis was the middle class. According to Larry Jones, “By the end of the 1920's the economic position of the independent middle class had deteriorated to such an extent that it was no longer possible to distinguish it from the proletariat on the basis of income.”⁵⁷ In other words, Jones states that the economic crises of the 1920's affected the incomes of the German middle class to the point where they were making no more money than the German working class. Jones also states that since the German middle class found itself in a state of economic and political crisis, ideologies such as National Socialism (Nazism) appealed to them by promising economic

⁵³ *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁴ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 141-153.

⁵⁵ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 141.

⁵⁶ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 155-165.

⁵⁷ Larry Eugene Jones, ““The Dying Middle”: Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics,” *Central European History* 5, no. 01 (1972): 25, accessed April 8, 2019, doi:10.1017/s0008938900000510.

stability and protection.⁵⁸ Therefore, the economic crisis in Germany became a dangerous potential since the effects that these crises had on ordinary Germans both disillusioned Germans with the Weimar system and made ideologies such as fascism seem more appealing.

Potential 6: Population Politics/Mass Politics

Yet another dangerous potential to arise after the conclusion of the First World War was the rise of “population politics.” The danger of this idea came through the implementation of this idea through mass politics, which follows the idea that “civilized” peoples deserve a state and hold the power to decide who controls the state.⁵⁹ In the case of Germany, Peter Fritzsche depicts this concept in his description of crowds in Berlin both before and after the First World War (e.g. 1914 and 1918), “...both crowds underscored the popular nature of modern politics. They showed the extent to which spontaneous plebiscites on the streets gave authority to twentieth-century institutions.”⁶⁰ In other words, Fritzsche states that the nature of “modern politics” was based on the support of the masses through public displays of support. In Germany, this made it possible for leaders such as Adolf Hitler to garner support and gain political power. According to Volker Ullrich, Hitler aimed to garner support for the NSDAP by drawing in crowds to his speeches and by increasing the attention that both he and the party drew publicly.⁶¹ However, according to Alan Bullock, this did not win the NSDAP power immediately since, during the elections of 1928, the NSDAP only received approximately 800,000 votes out of over 30 million votes and actually received 100,000 fewer votes than the party received in the 1924 elections.⁶² On the other hand, Hitler was placed in power after President Paul von Hindenburg rather than

⁵⁸ Jones, ““The Dying Middle”,” 53-54.

⁵⁹ Adam Blackler, “Versailles and “Population Politics”” (lecture, University of Wyoming, Laramie, September 11, 2018).

⁶⁰ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2003), 90.

⁶¹ Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent, 1889-1939* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 95.

⁶² Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 158.

through election by the populace.⁶³ Therefore, “population politics” in the form of mass politics became a dangerous potential in post-war Germany since it allowed Hitler and the NSDAP to garner support. However, this potential was not the only factor since popular support alone did not put the NSDAP in power.

In the case of Italy, like the latter case in Germany, Benito Mussolini was able to garner support for the Fascist Party through appealing to the masses. According to, Robert Paxton, Mussolini gained more popularity than his opponents, “... by serving economic and social interests as well as national sentiment.”⁶⁴ Similarly, according to Bruce F. Pauley, Mussolini’s pro-war messages gained him popularity among veterans of the First World War.⁶⁵ However, unlike Germany, the Fascist Party in Italy focused more on violent action in order to try and take control. According to Paxton, in 1922, Mussolini ordered the paramilitary Black shirts to start seizing public buildings and infrastructure (transport) across Italy and to begin a march to Rome in order to wrest power from the government.⁶⁶ However, these violent actions did not put Mussolini in power by directly seizing power from the government. Rather King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy appointed Mussolini as the head of the state in order to avert a possible crisis from trying to defend the city from the Blackshirts.⁶⁷ Therefore, population politics/mass politics served as a dangerous potential since it allowed Mussolini to garner support among the Italian populace. However, as in the case of Germany and Hitler, Mussolini was not placed in power by an election or by the Fascist party taking power by force, but rather through appointment by the head of state.

⁶³ Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 96-97.

⁶⁴ Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 60.

⁶⁵ Bruce F. Pauley, *Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century*, 4th ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 27, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uwy/detail.action?docID=1729068>.

⁶⁶ Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 87-91.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 90-91, 96-97.

Potential 7: Antisemitism

The last potential which was in place by the end of the First World War was anti-Semitism. However, unlike most of the other potentials, anti-Semitism existed in Europe before the beginning of the First World War and persisted after the end of the War. An example of the presence of antisemitism in Europe before the beginning of the First World War included the Dreyfus Affair in France. The Dreyfus Affair occurred between 1894 and 1906 with the unjust accusation of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French Army, whom the army charged with treason for the belief that he spied on France for Germany.⁶⁸ Even though the official charge for his court martial was treason, in reality Dreyfus was being persecuted due to anti-Jewish sentiments within the military.⁶⁹ Similarly, this trial created a large division in French society, with a side supporting Dreyfus' innocence known as the Dreyfusards, and on the other side there were those who supported the decision of the French military known as the Anti-Dreyfusards.⁷⁰ The basis of much of the Anti-Dreyfusard support for the decisions made by the French military drew from the antisemitic nature of the movement, which was portrayed through the anti-Jewish media (caricatures, cartoons, articles, etc.) which were written about Dreyfus and the event.⁷¹ Therefore, the Dreyfus Affair represents that the dangerous potential of antisemitism existed before the First World War.

After the end of the First World War, there were many instances of antisemitism in Europe which in turn created the possibility for willing executioners of the Holocaust throughout the continent. One location in Europe which held strong antisemitic attitudes after the First

⁶⁸ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 185-186.

⁶⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Alfred Dreyfus and the "Dreyfus Affair"," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/alfred-dreyfus-and-the-dreyfus-affair>.

⁷⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Alfred Dreyfus and the "Dreyfus Affair"."

⁷¹ "A Country Divided: Dreyfusards and Anti-Dreyfusards," The National Library of Israel, accessed April 16, 2019, <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/collections/PersonalWebs/Dreyfus/Storyline/Pages/dreyfusard.aspx>.

World War included Germany. Even before the ascension of the NSDAP in 1933, there existed a strong anti-Semitic attitude among many Germans in the form of the “Stab in the Back Legend.”⁷² This “legend,” which was largely spread by the German military leadership, followed the unjust belief that Germany lost the First World War not due to military defeat, but rather due to the betrayal of the German military by Jews and communist on the home front.⁷³ This, in turn, downplayed the sacrifices and service of German-Jews during the First World War, who served in large numbers in proportion to their population.⁷⁴ According to David Ian Hall, “The stab-in-the-back legend also reinvigorated the anti-Semitic beliefs and exclusionist political agendas of German ultranationalists, conservative south German Catholics, and members of the various pan-German organizations.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Hall states that Judaism became conflated with Bolshevism and was blamed for all the woes that Germany faced after the end of the First World War.⁷⁶ This, heightened status of anti-Semitism in Germany after the First World War, in turn, allowed the NSDAP to progressively radicalize the German population, through both legal legislation and the placement of propaganda within institutions, such as schools, after they took power in 1933.⁷⁷ These ideas and the progressive radicalization, according to Omer Bartov, created willing executioners of the Holocaust during the war, since the war against the Soviet Union forced many ordinary Germans to join the war against “Judeo-Bolshevism” and “barbarism” in the East.⁷⁸ Therefore, antisemitism was a dangerous potential in Germany since the “Stab in the

⁷² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Antisemitism in History: World War One," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-world-war-i>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ David Ian Hall, "Wagner, Hitler, and Germany's Rebirth after the First World War," *War in History* 24, no. 2 (2017): 162, accessed April 17, 2019, doi:10.1177/0968344515608664.

⁷⁶ Hall, "Wagner, Hitler, and Germany's Rebirth After the First World War," 162.

⁷⁷ Adam Blackler, "The Nazi Racial State" (lecture, University of Wyoming, Laramie, October 2, 2018).

⁷⁸ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 182.

Back Legend” and the progressive radicalization of the German populace created the possibility for ordinary Germans to become willing executioners of the Holocaust.

However, anti-Semitism did not only spawn willing executioners of the Holocaust in Germany alone. Another location where voluntary perpetrators of the Holocaust existed included Poland. This presence of willing executioners in Poland occurred in the form of the Jedwabne massacre in 1941. According to Jan Gross, during the summer of 1941, the Jews of the Polish town of Jedwabne were subjected to a violent episode of ethnic cleansing (e.g. a pogrom) at the hands of the Polish residents of the town.⁷⁹ Gross states that the pogrom was ordered by German officials present in the town after the German invasion of Poland.⁸⁰ However, Gross also states that even though this massacre of the Jewish population of the town was ordered by the Germans, the actual massacre was carried out by the Polish population of the town of their own volition (i.e. they were not forced to kill by the Germans).⁸¹ Therefore, the mass murder of the Jewish population of Jedwabne represented anti-Semitic attitudes in Poland since the Polish population of the town carried out the orders of the Germans willingly.

Similarly, anti-Semitism created willing participants of the Holocaust in the Slovak Republic (Slovakia). After the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Slovak Republic became an independent nation in 1939, under the rule of Catholic priest Józef Tiso.⁸² The population of the Slovak Republic, which was a close ally of Nazi Germany both before and during the Second World War, followed nationalistic ideas and were extremely religious in their following of Catholicism.⁸³ According to James Ward, “By the time the 1938 deportations ended, three key

⁷⁹ Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 2-6.

⁸⁰ Gross, *Neighbors*, 3-4.

⁸¹ Gross, *Neighbors*, 87-88.

⁸² Adam Blackler, ""Ordinary Men" or "Willing Executioners"" (lecture, University of Wyoming, Laramie, November 8, 2018).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

factors underlying the Holocaust in Slovakia were in place: a client relationship between the Slovak regime and Nazi Germany, a strengthened Ľudák radical wing eager to exploit the “Jewish Question,” and a Slovak government intent on excluding Jews from the Slovak economy and polity.”⁸⁴ In other words, Ward states that by the end of 1938, the government of the Slovak Republic was prepared to participate in the removal of Jews from Slovakian society. Similarly, according to the documentary, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*, the government of the Slovak Republic used the paramilitary Hlinka Guard in order to terrorize and attack Jews and Jewish property, as well as to serve as guards within the concentration camp outside of the city of Bratislava.⁸⁵ Also, according to the documentary, in 1942 the Slovak government offered to send 20,000 Jews to Germany in order to fulfill requests for forced labor and agreed to pay approximately 500 Reichsmarks for each Jew sent to Germany.⁸⁶ Therefore, anti-Semitism created willing executioners of the Holocaust in the Slovak Republic since the Slovak government and people, namely in the form of the Hlinka Guard, persecuted the Jewish population of the nation and willingly paid Germany to take the nation’s Jewish populace.

Counter Points: A Will for War?

A possible counterpoint for this argument would be that many people wished for war and would attempt to bring Europe into another World War. There were certainly individuals, namely Hitler and Mussolini, who wished for war in order to expand their nations and redeem a past sense of glory or pride lost during the First World War. In the case of Mussolini, his will for war appeared in his wish to restore a sense of Italian military glory and wished to establish an

⁸⁴ James Mace Ward, "The 1938 First Vienna Award and the Holocaust in Slovakia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 95, <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.uwyo.edu/article/580784/pdf>.

⁸⁵ Catherine Tatge and Laurence Rees, dirs., "Orders and Initiatives," in *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*, Netflix, 2005, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70058194?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C1%2C19256d9a-9cc3-4034-a85c-d7480149e2f0-131964407%2C%2C>.

⁸⁶ Tatge and Rees, "Orders and Initiatives."

Italian empire in Africa.⁸⁷ Mussolini's will for war coalesced in the 1935 invasion and conquest of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and the 1939 invasion of Albania.⁸⁸ In the case of Hitler, according to Nicholas Stargardt, his will for war appeared in the fact that after an agreement was reached after Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938, "... Hitler had raged in frustration that he had been 'cheated of his war'."⁸⁹

However, many in both Germany and Italy did not wish for another world war. For example, according to Stargardt,

On 1 September 1939, there were no patriotic marches and no mass rallies like those of August 1914. Instead the streets remained eerily quiet. Reservists reported up to their call-up points; civilians remained businesslike and subdued. The *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* felt compelled to comment that everyone was preoccupied with 'what will happen in the coming hours and days'. In his Nikolassee suburb, Jochen Klepper read the article and wondered, 'how can a people cope with a war without any enthusiasm whatever, so downcast?!'... the fear that the disasters of the First World War were about to be repeated was palpable.⁹⁰

Stargardt depicts the unwillingness of many Germans towards war through the fact that there was no form of enthusiasm for the possibility of war, rather there was a great deal of fear that there would be a repeat of the First World War. Similarly, according to Harry Cliadakis, "In the summer of 1939 the Fascist government of Italy was not prepared for nor did it wish to go to war."⁹¹ Similarly, Cliadakis states, "It is clear that the Italians believed that neither Germany nor the democracies had the military capacity to destroy each other, and they saw no value in a war of total destruction. They were unprepared for war, and their foreign policy aspirations did not call for a war policy."⁹² This represents an unwillingness to go to war among the Italian

⁸⁷ "Italy," Digital History, accessed April 17, 2019, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3486.

⁸⁸ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 289, 469.

⁸⁹ Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 25.

⁹⁰ Stargardt, *The German War*, 30.

⁹¹ Harry Cliadakis, "Neutrality and War in Italian Policy 1939-40," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (July 1974): 171, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.uwyo.edu/stable/260029>.

⁹² Cliadakis, "Neutrality and War in Italian Policy 1939-40," 173-174.

population and government since many did not believe that Italy could win a war, nor should they go to war. Therefore, in both Italy and Germany, many did not want another world war since there were fears that the war could not be one and the disastrous consequences of the First World War would be repeated. Thus, the Second World War was not an inevitability since people wished for war, rather many were unwilling to go to war due to fears of repeating the First World War and feelings that a Second World War could not be won.

Closing Points

In conclusion, despite the bias which viewing history with a degree of hindsight brings, the Second World War and the Holocaust, as with any other event in history, were not inevitable events. Rather, these events were made possible through the dangerous potentials which existed in Europe after the end of the First World War. One potential included the First World War itself and made the Second World War and the Holocaust possible due to the highly destructive and costly nature of the war which accustomed populations, such as the population of Germany, to ideas of mass death and greatly impacted the economies of the nations which participated in the war. Another potential, the peace treaties which came out of the Paris Peace Conference, namely the Treaty of Versailles, made the Second World War possible through the outright cruel treatment of Germany through the blunting of the nation's economic, military and international power by the victorious powers which angered the German populace. Similarly, the betrayal of Italy by the victorious powers through the denial of promises of territory created a sense of a "broken victory" and created a sense of anger among many Italians. A third potential, self-determination, became dangerous since this concept, along with the concept of homogeneity, when the victorious powers denied this right to German and Italian populations in Europe, thus creating a sense of hypocrisy within these populations. Nationalism was yet another dangerous

potential since this concept focused on ideas of homogeneity and “justified” actions, such as ethnic cleansing or the removal of rights, by a state so that the state may fulfill the goal of homogeneity. The potential of economic strife, especially in Germany in the form of the hyperinflationary crises and the occupation of the Ruhr, created a sense of disillusionment with the Weimar Government among the German populace and allowed for radical groups, such as the Nazis, to garner support among ordinary Germans. Similarly, the potential of population politics/mass politics allowed for leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini to obtain power through the popular support of the population of their nations. Lastly, the potential of anti-Semitism made the Second World War and the Holocaust possible since this concept allowed for the persecution of Jews across Europe both before and after the First World War. Similarly, this, in turn, made it possible for the emergence of willing executioners of the Holocaust both in Germany, and the rest of Europe.

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