

Steiner, Zara: *The Triumph of the Dark. European International History 1933-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-19-921200-2; 1130 S.

Rezensioniert von: Anand Toprani, International Security Studies, Yale University

The Triumph of the Dark and its predecessor, *The Lights that Failed* are the culmination of decades of research, analysis, and writing on the part of one of the pre-eminent historians of international affairs. *The Lights that Failed* covered the failure of the Wilsonian-era „lights“ of „reconstruction, internationalism, multilateralism, and disarmament“¹ under the dual shocks of the legacy of the First World War and the Great Depression. Her second book has a more focused objective: *The Triumph of the Dark*, as Zara Steiner explains, is a history of European great power relations following the ascent of the National Socialists to power in Germany, which she contends dealt the final blow to the aspirations of the 1920s. The chapters are usually presented in chronological order, although some have a specific thematic focus, such as Chapter 17, which details the persecution of Germany's Jews and their largely unsuccessful efforts to find refuge abroad. More than half the book is devoted to the one year period between the Munich Conference at the start of the Second World War. Just as the „hinge years“ of 1929-1933 revealed the shallow foundations of the Wilsonian „moment,“ the aftermath of Munich dashed the hopes of the previous five years that a peaceful accommodation with German might yet be found.

The reader is treated to a work of scholarship that makes exhaustive use of the secondary literature, including unpublished dissertations. Steiner's use of maps and statistical tables (both in the text itself and in an appendix) is also of great help in sorting through the dense factual material. Steiner's incorporation of the literature on intelligence history is especially noteworthy. Far too many historians of international history neglect the contributions made by intelligence services when it comes to the drafting of strategic assessments. It seems debatable, though, whether democratic societies make better use of in-

telligence assessments or expert advice than authoritarian regimes as Steiner contends (p. 1049).

Except for a chapter on Sino-Japanese relations, Steiner's narrative is focused almost exclusively on inter-European affairs. There is also a noticeable emphasis on British and French policy. Although there is extensive consideration of German grand strategy, a quick glance at her footnotes reveals that Steiner relied largely on insights from Adam Tooze.² Other European powers such as Italy or the Soviet Union make appearances, although their actions and motivations are usually examined in the context of developments that involved them directly. Steiner also opts against sustained analysis of U.S. foreign policy, which is perhaps justifiable after 1933 in the European context once the war debts issue receded in significance. Because she is compelled continuously to clarify the U.S. role in various crises, however, the reader is presented with a somewhat disjointed picture of American motivations. True, the United States was before 1938 „the dog that did not bark“ (p. 5). But by the time Britain and France finally abandoned appeasement, the military and economic support of the United States was indispensable (pp. 778-782).

Military affairs receive short shrift, which is regrettable since every great power was wrestling with the „revolution in military affairs“ unleashed during the First World War.³ Too often, the reader is presented with aircraft or tank production figures and costs, without any explanation as to how these new weapons were to be used. Steiner also presents a rather pessimistic appraisal of Britain's war-making capacity relative to Germany, a historical orthodoxy that has been challenged by historians such as David Edgerton.⁴

There are occasional factual errors. For example, Britain did not import any oil from Saudi Arabia before the war (p. 798) as oil was not discovered there until 1938 (Steiner prob-

¹ Zara Steiner, *The Lights that failed. European International History 1919-1933*, Oxford 2005, p. 1043.

² Adam Tooze, *Wages of Destruction. The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, London 2006.

³ MacGregor Knox/Williamson Murray (eds.), *The Dynamics of Military Revolution*, Cambridge 2001.

⁴ David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920-1970*, Cambridge 2006.

ably meant Iran). Moreover, Lord Chatfield was not Britain's „defence minister“ in 1939 (p. 766), but rather Minister for Coordination of Defence. Tellingly, the British Government did not create a ministerial post with real authority over the War Office, the Air Ministry, and the Admiralty until 1940. Such errors are inevitable in a work of such complexity and in no way detract from its value.

More problematic is the reliance on a largely chronological narrative, which means that the reader must push through a tremendous amount of material before arriving at Steiner's interpretations. This is unfortunate, as her assessments of policymaking are quite sound, such as her verdict on Munich (pp. 645-657). At other times, her arguments are presented awkwardly. For instance, Steiner offers a brilliant summation of strengths and liabilities imposed by Britain and France's imperial possessions in the event of a European war (pp. 795-807). Unfortunately, this comes three chapters after her discussion of the Munich Conference, in spite of the fact that Chamberlain's unwillingness to risk war in 1938 was motivated partially by his concerns about the unreliability of the Dominions.⁵ Perhaps Steiner would have been better served had she adopted Paul Kennedy's approach of alternating between chapters with a narrative and structural focus.⁶

There is no doubt that Steiner's two volumes will become the standard reference works on European international history between the world wars. But it is not entirely clear what additional value they will have for those readers seeking to make sense of such a complicated subject. By contrast, consider the example of another work published in the same Oxford University Press series on Modern Europe: Paul Schroeder's *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848*.⁷ Schroeder argued that the post-1815 Vienna System should not be understood as a „conservative restoration“ to the „balance of power“ of the 18th century. Rather, policymakers embraced what he called a system of „political equilibrium,“ which blended explicit and implicit norms about how the great powers should conduct themselves.

How on the other hand are we to assess the post-1933 „system“ in Europe? Steiner

claims that the Second World War „was Adolf Hitler's war“ (p. 1029), and that „[it] is with Hitler and Hitler's intentions that any student of European international history must start“ (p. 10). That is a reasonable argument, except that Steiner is reluctant to subscribe to a programmatic assessment of Hitler's grand strategy. Other historians have tried to reconcile Hitler's ideological rigidity with his diplomatic and military opportunism, but Steiner is not convinced.⁸ For her, there is no satisfactory explanation for Hitler's decision to risk war in 1939: „In the end, we just do not know what drove Hitler to take what could only be a massive gamble“ (p. 1031). This is a disappointing conclusion in view of her thesis that „[the] road to war was mapped out by the actions of the German leader“ (p. 1051). Ultimately, one cannot help but sense that *The Triumph of the Dark* was a missed opportunity for Steiner to showcase both her unrivalled mastery of detail and her historical wisdom.

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⁵ Keith Middlemas (The Strategy of Appeasement: The British Government and Germany 1937-1939, Chicago 1972) does a good job of explaining how Britain's exposed imperial position influenced the appeasement of Germany.

⁶ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, London 1980.

⁷ Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848*, Oxford 1994.

⁸ A good, if somewhat dated, summary of this literature may be found in the introduction of Milan Hauner's misleadingly titled: *India in Axis Strategy*, Stuttgart 1981.