

WORLD WAR: THEN AND NOW

AN EXERCISE IN HISTORY

By J. E. WALLACE STERLING

In the introductory article to a series beginning with this issue, Prof. Sterling asks and indicates some answers to the question, "Does history repeat itself?" referring of course to the current war.

Does history repeat itself?

In the early nineteen-twenties, an outstanding German general, Max von Hoffman, wrote a book, *The War of Lost Opportunities*. It was about the war in which he had just brilliantly served and in it he offered explanations for repeated German failures to reach a final decision on the field of battle. Failure in the West in 1914 against Belgium, France and Britain was followed by failure in the East in 1915 against Russia. Recourse was then had to a second attempt to win in the West, chiefly at Verdun, but in vain. After these three failures, Germany, in General Hoffman's opinion, should have bent every effort to secure a peace. But this was not done. Instead a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare was begun, and, after the collapse of Russia late in 1917, preparations were accelerated for a final Herculean land effort in the West. This also failed, but it exhausted the German army and "left Germany defenceless to the cold hate of England, the fanatical desire for revenge of France, and a crack-brained Wilson."

The Treaty of Versailles stripped Germany of her military might. But after Hitler's accession to power in January, 1933, Germany began openly to rearm. The period of this rearmament was contemporaneous with the Italian war against Abyssinia and the civil war in Spain, and in the latter arena Germany and other nations had an opportunity to test new equipment and tactics. There was much talk of *Blitzkrieg*: lightning war. The phrase implied not only that blows would fall from the sky but also that these, in conjunction with blows struck from the ground, would achieve quick victory. But neither Abyssinia nor Spain afforded a convincing preview of the *Blitz* in action, although numerous extenuating circumstances were cited. It took the German "Campaign of Eighteen Days" against Poland, September, 1939, adequately to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new warfare. Even so, this masterful performance was discredited in some western quarters on grounds of Polish weakness. Such judgment was revised, however, after the quick and comparatively cheap German successes against France and Britain, two great powers, in May and June, 1940.

The newspaper headlines of these anxious months recalled the headlines of August, 1914. On both occasions the German juggernaut seemed irresistible. But in 1914, there was the miracle of the Marne; and in 1940, there was the epic of Dunkirk. Even with the great advantage over 1914 of being able to concentrate her force in the West—thanks to the agreements with Russia, the defeat of Poland, and the alliance with Italy—Germany failed to achieve a final decision in the spring of 1940. The French army was put out of action, it is true, but

Britain, supported by the European governments in exile and with cash-and-carry access to American supplies, was left to continue the fight. When, late in August and in September, the Germans attacked Britain, they were repulsed with heavy losses.

Why did Hitler allow Britain to get her second wind in the period from June to August, 1940? The whole answer to this question is not yet known. Some say Hitler believed the Churchill government would accept his "peace offer" of July 19; others think Germany was surprised by her own successes and therefore militarily unprepared to exploit the victories she had just won; others hold that her General Staff made an error of strategical judgment in proceeding first to finish off France. Whatever the reasons, the failure to press the attack against Britain immediately after Dunkirk is already being pointed to as one of Germany's "lost opportunities" in this war.

Meanwhile the war at sea had been getting under way. General Hoffmann has something to say also about the sea campaigns of the first world war. In his opinion, Germany began submarine warfare then before she had U-boats in sufficient numbers to achieve her purpose, and so succeeded only in exposing her hand. Further, although action by the German High Seas Fleet was not seriously in prospect after the Battle of Jutland, May 31, 1916, building of large surface naval vessels continued. The energy and material which this building consumed might better have been applied, Hoffmann thinks, on the construction of submarines, on which reliance was placed after 1916 in an effort to reach a decision at sea, an effort which came very close to success.

In 1939, Germany began her campaigns at sea under the direction of Admiral Erich Raeder. This man had fought at Dogger Bank and at Jutland in the first world war and harbored bitter memories of having his ship sunk under him at the latter engagement. He is reported to have looked forward to the day when he might avenge not only the loss of his ship but also the humiliation attached to the surrender of the German High Seas Fleet in 1918-19. Raeder became head of the German Admiralty in 1935. By then he had reflected much on Germany's naval position and policy. He recognized that the limitations imposed by the Versailles Treaty made it impracticable for Germany to challenge successfully the British navy's battleline. He recognized also that Germany's chief successes at sea in the first world war had been accomplished by surface and undersea raiders. His thinking on these matters is set down in his two-volume work on cruiser warfare and is reflected in German sea campaigns since 1939.

In the prosecution of these campaigns Germany has enjoyed many advantages over 1914-1918. Diplomatic achievement and the march of events have won her the support of Italy and Japan, both considerable naval powers and stronger now than a quarter-century ago when they were Germany's enemies. Military successes from Narvik to the Pyrenees have placed ir

German hands coastal bases close to the British Isles and the North Atlantic supply lines, on both of which German armed forces can prey by water and by air. Furthermore, Britain's defensive strength was less in 1940 than in 1914. Not only did she stand practically alone in the later year, but also she enjoyed only about one-half her former destroyer strength and lacked strategically valuable bases in Eire. Building, American aid, and more recently American participation have done much to readjust the balance toward the more favorable situation of 1914-1918, but with fronts now in the Near, Middle and Far East, the necessary lengthening of the supply lines has placed dangerously heavy burdens on Allied shipping and its protection. But German concentration on raider warfare at sea, carried on with the comparative advantages just mentioned, did not bring Germany a decision in the North Atlantic in the first half of 1941. Indeed, such operational successes as is enjoyed had the result, reminiscent of 1917, of hastening the repeal of the restrictive provisions of the Neutrality Act, a repeal which amounted to reasserting a traditional American doctrine of freedom of the seas. To be sure, the end of the German raider campaign is not yet, and its current forcefulness is seriously hampering the war effort of the United Nations; but it is being answered in a manner which bids fair again to deny Germany the decision she seeks in this theater of war.

The *Blitzkrieg*, that had worked against Poland and France, failed over Britain. Nor was it well adapted to the sea. As a result, by midsummer of 1941, Mr. Churchill's "tight little isle" was in much better condition to carry on the struggle than it had been a year earlier; in fact, that condition was steadily improving as a result of increasing support from the Empire-Commonwealth and the United States. This combination of circumstances had the effect of taking some of the *Blitz* out of *Blitzkrieg* by bringing in prospect a long war. This prospect confronted Germany with many problems, among them supply and morale, which would be more seriously aggravated the longer the war lasted, unless they could be solved by new victories. The *Blitz* victories in Yugoslavia, Greece and Crete provided no such solution. Could Russia be laid low, however, a solution might be possible!

On June 22, 1941, when Germany attacked the U.S.S.R., the *Reich* had been at war a little more than twenty-two months. A comparable date in the first world war would be July, 1916, by which time Germany's third attempt to reach a decision on land was bogging down in the hills around Verdun, the pressure on that fortress was being relieved by a British offensive on the Somme, and the U-boat campaign, indecisive against Allied shipping, was arousing the United States to stiffer protests. The time was approaching, when, according to General Hoffmann, the Germany of William II should have launched an all-out peace offensive on the basis of the *status quo* 1916, conceding the restoration of Belgium if necessary. In December, 1916, Germany did offer to discuss peace terms at a general conference of the powers, but this move did not represent a determined effort to end hostilities, and the Allies, considering the offer a war maneuver rather than a serious peace proposal, rejected it.

In midsummer, 1941, the Germany of Adolf Hitler was bent not on an all-out peace move but on a new all-out war

move. Germany's decision to attack Russia was certainly one of the most important of the war. At least two considerations appeared to have entered into it: a) that Russian resources were necessary for the continuance of the prolonged war in the West (b) that the *Blitzkrieg* would work against the Soviets. It was clear, of course, that success would bring within reach the additional strategic and economic resources of the Middle East.

These attractive possibilities were materially offset, however, by two inescapable facts. First, the attack on Russia placed Hitler's Germany in the toils of a two-front war which had fatefully divided Germany strength in 1914-1918 and which, therefore, Hitler had previously foresworn. Secondly, by bringing Russia into the ranks of Germany's enemies, Hitler closed the main opening in the continental blockade which Britain and her allies had been applying since the war began. This blockade was in the main a sea blockade, but it had already been reinforced by a land front in North Africa and was soon (July-August, 1941) to be further reinforced by a support line from Syria to India and a strengthened supply line, not only from the British Isles but also from the New World, into the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Since Russia has not succumbed to the German *Blitz*, Germany finds herself virtually landlocked in Europe and surrounded by foes whose strength gives promise of waxing as German strength wanes. Added strain has thus been placed on Germany's war machine, whose increased demands for men and equipment have made necessary an intensification of the already ruthless exploitation of Europe's resources. This in turn has evoked from the people of the occupied countries a progressively more violent opposition which is cheating Germany of the full realization of the great resources at her command.

Germany, then, as in the first world war, has tried to reach a decision in the East after failing to do so in the West. She has sacrificed the advantage of a one-front war with which she began the struggle and finds herself as in the days of William II caught between two fires. Any effective strengthening of forces for an offensive on one front will involve some weakening of forces for defense on the other, and vice versa. During this past winter there has been expectation of a renewed German offensive in some direction, and most observers thought it would be toward the East. The German advance in the Crimea may well have been intended as the initial move in such a drive, but the relatively minor gains there cannot be effectively developed or exploited until the tactical initiative has been wrested from the advancing Russian armies further north, especially in the Kharkov area. So long as the Russians retain the initiative they now enjoy and the potentialities of a land front in Western Europe continue to increase, it is difficult to foresee how Germany can successfully extricate herself from the meshes which entangled her when the *Blitz* failed in Russia.

The progress of the war in Europe recalls not only the war of 1914-1918 but also the Napoleonic wars. In so doing it is making good the assertions of those military and political strategists who have long maintained that no power can dominate that continent until it has decisively defeated the great naval

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