

ALL AGAINST ALL

*The Long Winter of 1933 and the Origins
of the Second World War*

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JANKOWSKI

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Preface

Occasionally, people ask me what I am working on. The moment in the 1930s, I reply, when the world's greater powers and some of its lesser ones turned their backs on whatever "world order" still existed and on each other. "Sounds just like today," they often say.

I wonder about that. Between the autumn of 1932 and the early summer of 1933, Hitler came to power, Japan sent troops across the Great Wall of China and left the League of Nations, Mussolini looked southward toward the Horn of Africa; Roosevelt, the new American president, deepened American isolation from Europe, Britain withdrew into the safe zones of empire, and France watched three prime ministers try and fail to bring its two former allies back into the charmed circle of the victors of 1918. Instead the three fell out acrimoniously over war debts, arms, currency, tariffs, and Germany. They had done so before, but now two world conferences that they and the League of Nations had been planning for years, about disarmament and global economic recovery, failed abjectly. The walls were going up, everywhere. In that long winter the world finally changed, from postwar to prewar. Does that sound much like the scene today? I am not sure.

The belief in global fragmentation runs strong. It supposes a resurgence of centrifugal nationalist forces, conspiring against the mirage of global integration that turned naive heads after the Cold War ended. The dark parable of the 1930s evokes as well the rise of authoritarian movements and their demagogic leaders, together with

the economic discontents thought to sustain them. The certitudes attach themselves to each other, almost like rules of deduction. Nationalism, authoritarianism, social resentment—such is today’s demonic triad, sighted around the globe, signaled to all, and reflected in the distant mirror of W. H. Auden’s “low, dishonest decade.”

Historical analogies are easy to debunk. This one rests on muddled assumptions about the world then and now. It is true, for example, that the economic catastrophe of the early 1930s helped turn minor Fascist parties in a few countries into mass movements. But in the United States and France it brought center-left, social democratic governments to power. And until recently, “national populists” deemed blood relatives of those of the 1930s often succeeded in the most prosperous economies while struggling to break through where growth was slowest and unemployment highest. Most of the authoritarian governments of the 1930s were already in place when the Depression hit, and then, rather than bring the fractious Fascists in, contrived to keep them out, at least for a while. Some of the loudest cries of ethnic and racial panic came from the most democratic of cultures. The model falls of its own sweep. It sets off the eternal strife between the historian, who sees the trees but no forest, and the political scientist, who sees the forest but no trees.

If a historical analogy were needed to illuminate our current predicaments, the world of 1900 would probably serve more usefully than that of 1930. In the early twentieth century, transnational flows of people, goods, and capital yielded not only global integration but protectionist enthusiasms, the Yellow Peril, White Australia and *France d’abord*, exclusion acts in America and pan-Germanic fantasies in Berlin and Vienna. The great powers fretted over their world position in the coming century. The new school of geopolitics was born. Nationalism had much to thank globalization for. It still does.¹

Still, no one reading the newspapers today can escape at times a frisson of recognition on opening those of the 1930s. Demagogues exploited national or ethnic animosities to win or keep power; internationalism, variously expressed as world bodies, transnational asso-

ciations and civil society, world revolution, free trade, open borders, collective security, or the earnest repudiation of any and all great power rivalry, fell prey to strident calls for national primacy. Sometimes but not always such calls accompanied attacks on democracy; sometimes but not always they served the demagogues. Diverse governments and regimes, from Moscow to Washington and Tokyo, heeded the calls in diverse ways. Authoritarians, who bridle at multilateral constraints abroad as well as constitutions and dissent at home, might more readily take up the cry of the 1930s—“Every man for himself”—but they were not the only ones.

To some observers, in particular those called realists, the sixty or seventy years of relative peace and prosperity that elapsed under the American aegis since 1945 seem aberrant, a historical accident unlikely to recur.² Nothing in the scenery of the 1930s would surprise the realists among the international relations theorists now, other perhaps than the ink wasted on lamenting it. In its most elemental form, realism paints the world that way anyway—as an anarchic menagerie of states, each jostling for power, security, or advantage.³ However differently they treat their compatriots, however foreign to each other their ways at home, they obey the same logic once they step outside and eye one another. There the world imposes on them its sovereign indifference to rules. It condemns them to compete but not necessarily to fight, for they can resort to instruments that neutralize the threat of subversion or subjection. They can, for example, restore equilibrium by manipulating the balance of power, in which smaller states typically coalesce to arrest the emergence of a hegemon in their midst, or they can deter by manifest pugnacity their greedier neighbors, or collude to eliminate or partition an inveterate troublemaker. But these tools provide no guarantees. In its different versions and manifestations, realism—still the dominant notion of explaining why nation-states behave toward one another the way they do—presents a world both anarchic and predictable, in which fitful events can reveal the recurrent sequence of threat and response to chroniclers astute enough to discern it.

Many were unwittingly doing so before realism, neorealism, and their variants elevated premise into ever more sophisticated theory. Celebrated works of traditional diplomatic history presented war, peace, and conditions in between as outcomes in the struggle between modern states for survival, expansion, or tranquility. “In the state of nature which Hobbes imagined,” one of them began, “violence was the only law, and life was ‘nasty, brutish and short.’ Though individuals never lived in this state of nature, the Great Powers of Europe have always done so.”⁴ Two and a half millennia earlier, Thucydides had assumed much the same of the powers of his own day.⁵ Neither he nor his successors knew anything of realist thought in international relations, let alone the rational choice or game theories into which some of it more recently has devolved; but they shared with it a Hobbesian premise about primitive anarchy in the world, one that had somehow to be contained lest the war of all against all reclaim its ways.

Just such a prospect haunted the interwar years. Minds that in the 1920s looked back on the Great War as a descent into primeval strife looked ahead in the 1930s to an even more calamitous relapse, the shedding of all lingering restraints on human savagery. Public figures routinely warned of the end of civilization. Genocide they did not foresee, oddly, but chemical warfare and skies dark with bombers—two other innovations from the previous conflict—they did. The threat of renewed international anarchy seemed somehow to lie at the heart of the matter. Arnold Toynbee, scrutinizing public opinion in 1936, found resignation as well as dismay—the gloomy prognosis that a condition that had lasted four centuries might last for another four. In the short term, “the new international era (if new it was) was likely to end in the catastrophic fashion of its nineteenth-century predecessor.”⁶

Whether preaching the virtues of necessity like its classical ancestors or revealing the inexorable constraints of an anarchic world like its structural exponents, realism both recommended and predicted balancing.⁷ It envisaged the ceaseless creation and re-creation of equilibriums in a multipolar and even, for some, a bipolar world order, without troubling to explain how they flourished or withered,

or whether conflicts erupted from their formation or from their disintegration. All, in a pattern taken from organization theory, would conform to the unwritten rules, as the weaker states emulated the most successful ones. But nothing of the sort happened in the interwar years. The alliances that had held together throughout the Great War vanished with the peace, and none emerged to take their place. Even while Britain sought to foster the rehabilitation of Germany, and France with increasing desperation to contain it, a balance of power, a will-o'-the-wisp that found no artisans, never materialized. The Soviet Union, which sought in the morning to prevent any coalition of European powers from taking shape, at midday to turn one against Germany, and at nightfall to join the Reich itself, appeared most faithful to realist logic; but these were tactical devices to allow its own militarization, which had begun before any of the others. The United States was not interested in balances of any kind.

Later, realists would try to attribute the instabilities of the interwar world to structural flaws—by explaining, for example, that no Concert system emerged to keep the peace as it had after 1815, or that no global hegemon filled the place that Britain had occupied in the previous century, or that the tripolar world before the Second World War was more dangerous than the bipolar one after it.⁸ All such structural flaws were held to hasten a global melee, much as an army degenerates into a band of looters once inside the gates of the city. But why did no Concert form, why did the men who returned home from Versailles in 1919 not want one as avidly as their predecessors at Vienna a century earlier? And the world was not tripolar between the wars. Its poles kept shifting in number and in weight, the variables that structural realism allows but does not account for.

As a theory, realism explained little of this world; as a prescription, it allowed isolationism and appeasement. The first invoked geopolitical necessities, the second the realities of power. E. H. Carr, one of the most celebrated of the early interwar realists, advocated encouraging Germany to expand southeastward and as late as the spring of 1939 still thought highly of the “realist” Neville Chamberlain. Later

he wondered how he could have been so blind. How, indeed? Like others later, he had belittled the transformative power of belief or fanaticism in history. If international structure alone governed the behavior of states toward one another, then much of recorded history would never have taken place; and even Carr soon drew back from the implications of unbridled realism.⁹

The doctrine, for all its staying power, never reigned unchallenged. Neither did Hobbes's view of the state of nature. For centuries, political philosophers imagined a primitive humanity differently and conceived of another civilized one. Liberals came to envisage an interdependent world in which nation-states might at length overcome some of their jealousies, surrender some of their prerogatives, shed some of their weapons. In the interwar years they hoped to avert armageddon not by balancing power but by lifting the mantle of absolute sovereignty from the nation-state—the irreducible unit of the modern world and of much realist thought as well. They envisioned a system of collective security at Geneva that would frustrate any aggressor in their midst. Much confusion attended the concept—would the ostracism of world opinion suffice, or might the League's members resort to force against the transgressor, a prospect that offended many a liberal conscience? But the belief moved millions, whether they could define it or not. Marxism, in its way as optimistic as classical liberalism, predicted that the progress of capitalism would lead to the dissolution of the nation-state. It would lead instead to the dissolution of Marxism, but for now the chiliasm of the International illuminated the path to a classless and warless world for many a convert, renegade, or pilgrim.

At the end of the Great War, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the first and Vladimir Lenin the second such genial world vision. Both saw them vanish within years, in their own lifetimes. The 1930s buried them. Disciples still carried the torches, but the world moved on. The powers that had enshrined collective security at Geneva declined to set it in motion in Manchuria; it lingered on, finally expiring before Italian and German provocations in Africa and within Europe

itself. Wilson had extended the other promise of his dream, national self-determination, only to peoples of the European continent, and some of these, new minorities in new states, he left unhappier than he had found them. The liberalism of free trade and the invisible hand, from which realism would borrow the notion of actors conspiring unwittingly to create an international system greater than themselves, and which oddly echoed Marxism in predicting the erosion of states and their seawalls by the tides of commerce, disappeared in the ruins of the Great Depression.¹⁰ The Soviet leadership soon joined the international system, to the extent that it could find one.

By the mid-1930s a wilderness of answers awaited anyone asking the world's leaders about the forces that moved them. All, of course, preferred self-preservation to extinction, but the promise, like the threat, they expressed in historical visions of all shapes and hues—as spaces and races, for the Germans and the Japanese; in the recovery of lost grandeur, for the Italians and the Hungarians; in the freedom of the seas and all that went with it, for the British in their vast empire. The Soviets, with almost as much reason as the French and the Poles, never stopped worrying about the defense of their homeland. Nor did the Americans, determined to insulate their own from the vicious traps of the Old World. Not surprisingly, such motley protagonists steered by their own diplomatic and military lights. The British and the French progressively shed the chimera of collective security but still clung to the statecraft of Richelieu, Castlereagh, and Bismarck, made of treaties and incremental gains and compromises; they conceived of a war, if one had to come, that would lose in ferocity what it would gain in duration, and spare their peoples the devastation they all too vividly imagined. Germany and the Soviet Union signed pacts and proclaimed the same moderation but privately conceived of peace as temporary, and prepared for war, when it came, as an affair of annihilation.

Neither realism nor most competing theories of international politics need dwell on such national eccentricities. The theorists excavate the grammar of international history, the historians recover

its spoken languages. Realists, for example, insist that power, security, or “self-help” inspire international behavior. How shifting belief systems and foreign policies express these or any other drive is of ancillary interest at most; the founder of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz, excluded them from his theoretical project.¹¹ But for historians they lie front and center—plural rather than singular, transient rather than fixed, and irreducible to a universal appetite, fear, or submission to a univocal and systemic *deus ex machina*. From their end of the telescope, historians gaze at states large and small changing the face they present to the world, sometimes in startling ways. The twentieth century alone might mesmerize. Within one decade, the 1940s, the United States assumed a role in the world it had shunned for its entire history. Within another, the 1980s, the Soviet Union adopted a novel conception of its security that transformed its relations with its neighbors and with its principal adversary. Within a generation, well before reunification, Germany had become unrecognizable to anyone familiar with its ways in the first half of the century—once avid for a place that its own resources could not sustain, it now shrank from one they insistently invited. Japan renounced imperial conquest and the arms that had assured it. Special circumstances explain such shifts, but so do conscious acts of will, the inflection of a national story to a changed sense of purpose. American exceptionalism could as easily yield interventionism as isolationism. Germany and Japan, dropping the language of existential panic, severed national from military success. For the first time in its brief history, the Soviet Union ceased to discern only threats in the world.

Sometimes, whether they see themselves differently in the mirror or not, states undertake to transform the international system through which they see each other. They define it rather than submit to it. They did so after 1815, when European powers leagued against France placed stability before individual aggrandizement in the coming peace. They resolved to give up balancing one another, a competitive pastime that had yielded only imbalance and endemic war since 1763, and to observe instead a Concert of interlocking obliga-

tions and restraints. Not everyone profited—as the Poles and Saxons could confirm—and the system relied on two hegemonic flank powers, Britain and Russia, to moderate the others between them; but its vestigial spirit spared the Continent a war between any great powers for a generation and a general war among them for a century.¹² They did so again after 1945, when the United States, its former allies and adversaries, and the countries of the nascent European community devised another novel system of international cooperation. It resembled no other before it, but once again elevated shared over individual goals. Once again it yielded an extended peace. The Cold War alone could not induce the participants to renounce proximate for remote satisfactions so readily—they had envisaged doing so before the deep freeze set in during the late 1940s, and continued to do so when it thawed during the 1970s and ended in the 1990s. They had changed.¹³

During the interwar years the reverse happened. Every effort to transform the international system, every parley in the 1920s and early 1930s in Washington, Geneva, Genoa, Locarno, the Hague, or London, had come undone before the mid-1930s. The problems began at home. There a unique sense of internal and external vulnerability came to grip greater and lesser powers alike. It had happened before, in some Continental powers before 1914, but never had it seized so many in and out of government so simultaneously—in Europe, in North America, in East Asia. It marked a new variety of nationalism, directed less at a single oppressor or hereditary enemy than at a hostile world that manifested itself through agents at home—or within an empire—as well as abroad. Communism, immigration, capitalism, Judaism, the West, pacifism, the existential threat in all its guises—such frights, wherever they took hold and whoever exploited them, crossed borders as though with *passe-partout* keys, and insinuated themselves into foreign and domestic politics alike.

Globalization might explain the ubiquity of such popular fears, along with the spread of political languages intelligible to peoples once deaf to one another. The spread of democracy, liberal or not—

the widening of the political nation—might explain their impact. Both novelties appeared durably not in the twentieth but in the nineteenth century. And, as a force in international relations, the crowd did not await either to make its voice heard now and again. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when armies themselves could resemble mobs, popular fury as much as statecraft sustained the wars of religion in western and central Europe. In the eighteenth century, popular Francophobia in Britain and popular Austrophobia in France disrupted the chess games of diplomats, and in the middle of the nineteenth, Russophobia in London and Christian Orthodox fervors in Saint Petersburg drew governments into a Crimean war that some of their wiser members would have preferred to avoid. The palace heard the street, not always happily. And soon the boardroom and the newsroom as well: An entire school of German historians, promoting the *Primat der Innenpolitik*, attributes much of Wilhelmine belligerence and indeed of the crisis of the summer of 1914 to a stratagem to deflect public opinion from domestic onto foreign targets, or to appease powerful domestic lobbies that pushed heady vistas of Continental domination on compliant chancellors.¹⁴ At Vienna in 1815 the diplomats had managed, mostly, to ignore domestic public opinion. At Versailles in 1919 they could not, even though they still sequestered themselves as though they could.

The novelty of the interwar crisis lay not in the obsolescence of cabinet diplomacy, as passé as cabinet wars; it lay in the way mass politics eventually came to work against any international engagements other than the most transparently and immediately self-serving. Avoidance or predation returned as the warlike options of peace. The pattern hardened halfway between the First and the Second World Wars, in the early 1930s, the moment this book describes. “The historian of law,” the great English medievalist Frederic William Maitland said in an inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1888, “will often have to work from the clear to the vague, from the known to the unknown.”¹⁵ He would have to begin, as it were, at the end—and the historian of the early 1930s might travel backward as well, setting out from the

recorded breakdown of international conferences, moving on to the hazier realms of domestic resistance to foreign commitments, and arriving at the dark territory of national delusions.

These yielded Hitler, the flight from collective commitments, the passivity of the Western powers, Japanese defiance, the Soviet persecution mania, and much else besides. They belong to the origins of the Second World War but not to its causes, which lie in the deeds committed or omitted in the years that followed. They sprang from recent experience, most obviously the Great War and the Great Depression, but also from the more remote lore of national exploits, ordeals, or humiliations; and they bridged the gap between history lived and history made. Among Americans, war in Europe was a memory, isolation a delusion, neutrality a policy. The carriers of each declined in number even as they gained in precision of speech. Between the largely silent millions who remembered and the articulate few who governed rose the hubbub of public discourse, where national beliefs took shape and where dominant motifs emerged. Germany's victimhood, Soviet Russia as savior and pariah, Japan's lifeline in Manchuria and its millennial Asian mission, Britain's imperial sanctuary—such collective conceits figure heavily in the pages that follow, for without them no one can glimpse the mental world through which even the most pragmatic national leaders moved and encountered one another, and through which the children of the First World War became the parents of the Second.

Years later, after the war and the genocides, some historians tried to find general explanations for what had befallen the world. But many more did so for the European catastrophe of 1914 than for the much wider global conflict that erupted at intervals and in bursts between 1937 and 1941. This one seemed to federate national or regional conflicts, best understood in their own terms. Besides, the incremental spread of war across three continents paradoxically presented at first glance less of a mystery than the access of midsummer fears in the smallest of them—Europe—in 1914. Posterity could best understand the outbreaks of war in East Asia in 1937, in Europe in

1939, and in the Pacific in 1941 through the histories that lay behind them, which were diverse, controversial, only slowly accessible in the archives, and rewarding as well in ways that might not even touch on the conflicts that followed. The war laid waste much of the planet, and grand or planetary strategies, the links between one theater and another, attracted much expert attention; but the search for origins on a comparable scale lagged fitfully.¹⁶

Some such inquiry already preoccupied American and European leaders when they emerged from what some—not all—were calling the Second World War.¹⁷ Implicitly or explicitly, they blamed the conflagration on the breakdown in the 1930s of liberal democracy, economic growth, international trade and investment, and a collective security system engaging all. They now conceived of each as a precondition for the others and envisioned the world they wished to remake as the schematic opposite of the one they had left behind. Not by accident, and unlike 1815, they aspired to transform domestic as much as international society. In time, peace and prosperity in the West appeared to validate their premise, unimpeachable as a guide to policy yet solipsistic as a historical argument. Yes, breakdowns had led to breakdown. It fell to historians to explain how economic stagnation led to war—it had not always done so—or how the retreat of democracy had done the same, scarcely an axiomatic sequence either; and they struggled to find answers that convincingly transcended national boundaries.

Diplomatic history proposed the Treaty of Versailles, which set satisfied against dissatisfied signatories. But long before Hitler launched his war in 1939, events had nullified almost all the clauses that Germans deemed humiliating. Why did tensions only worsen as grievances left by the Great War vanished, redressed with the consent of the victors? Economic history proposed the Depression, which helped breed right-wing nationalists in Fascist, racist, or militarist form, agitating to install aggressive regimes that pursued expansion and salvation abroad. But the Depression could not explain the autonomous staying power of such nationalisms, nor why

they only intensified as some of the most resentful claimants—Japan, Germany—recovered more steadily than others from the economic depths of the early 1930s. A psychosocial history rested on the degrading effects of total war, and supposed that sixty or seventy million veterans revisited on their world the brutalization that the Great War had inflicted on them. The mass diagnosis did not explain why so many became pacifists instead, or why returning German or Italian or Russian veterans should have been more brutalized than their French or British counterparts.¹⁸ Each national passage from peace to war was different, each followed its own path from shared conditions to individual choices. No wonder historians shied away from the search for common origins that tempted so many who pondered July 1914.

This book suggests that each path ran through national mythology, now ingrained in mass politics. Each was unique, but in the interwar years each set itself against the world in some way. Each rendered international norms and rules discretionary if not irrelevant. Another school of international relations theory, more recent than the others, might welcome the suggestion. “Anarchy,” according to constructivism, “is what states make of it.” It may be given *ab initio*, as the realists insist, but it is also malleable. It can lend itself to treatments other than amoral self-help; more cooperative arrangements can emerge among friends, less bellicose stances among enemies, according to national identities made or modified. Identity is too hydra-headed a construct to be used here, but the idea is the same: who nations think they are can determine what they want.¹⁹

Sometimes a contagion of resentment at national insult, indignity, or humiliation spreads among them. Grievances of all kinds rankle, and popular leaders arise to voice them. “Sounds just like today”—these, more than hazardous assimilations of a regime or party then to another today, are the unsettling echoes of the 1930s today, the sounds that unnerve. A geopolitical birthright, claimed by Japan then and by China today; an ethnic rallying cry across the borders, raised by Germany among others then and by Russia today;

a repudiation of ungrateful allies, abusers of generosity in war and in peace, by their American benefactor then and again today—plaintiffs might disappear or even exchange complaints, but the rancor still stirs.

The transnational novelties of the 1930s differed profoundly from those of today. The diffusion of power among countless state and non-state actors, and a profusion of multilateral organizations demanding more acronyms than the alphabet can provide, make the world neither multipolar like the 1930s nor unipolar like the 1990s, but “a-polar.”²⁰ No depression paralyzes the global economy today. Aggressive dictatorial regimes and the ideological challenge presented by Communism and Fascism gave the earlier decade a unique face, while the specters of environmental crisis, nuclear proliferation, and the cyberspace jungle confer an unwelcome distinction on our own. But national panics need not arise in identical circumstances. Logically, they arise at the same time, for they both conspire and contend with each other. They join even as they pull away from one another, recanting as though with one voice the internationalism of their predecessors while recoiling at any hint of a newfound community.

In the 1930s, with embarrassment or contempt, regimes of all sorts buried the vestiges of collective security and shared norms. By the 2010s their numerous descendants were adjourning *sine die* a global agenda that had opened the millennium promising free trade, national self-determination, and human rights. The first again fell prey to economic nationalisms—one study found that the United States in 2019 was threatening China with tariffs approximating those of its Hawley-Smoot Act of 1930, the loudest opening shot in the trade wars that followed.²¹ The second again opened a Pandora’s box of subnationalisms and ethnic separatisms, prone to exploitation by neighbors promising sympathy but pursuing power. The third again engaged the international community’s responsibility to protect minorities at risk from their own states, and newly and boldly entertained the right to intervene with force against the oppressors; but governments soon thought better of that.²² The order supposed to

follow the Cold War proved as fanciful as that supposed to follow the Great War, and almost as short-lived; what will follow?

No one can know, not with the nationalist regression itself so resolutely resisted, notably in Europe—but even there the disputants in each land clash over national identity and not over Continental or global problems. We do know that the spreading disorder of the 1930s culminated in the Second World War. It did not have to. The future combatants had it in their power, over the decade, to make choices and turn their national stories in other directions. They did not do so. That alone suggests a parallel with our day. Anarchy, indeed, is what states make of it.