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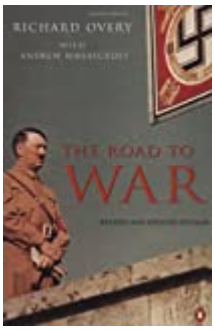

Richard Overy. *The Road to War.* London: Penguin Books, 1999. xix + 444 pp. Â£9.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-028530-7.

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Interest in what has now decidedly become a classic historical *genre*, 'the origins of the Second World War', does not seem to be abating. The year 1999 saw the publication of at least two new editions of major works dedicated to the exploration of the theme. One was *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered : A.J.P. Taylor and the Historians* edited by Gordon Martel.[1] The other, *The Road to War* is the object of this review.

In his 'Preface to the Second Edition', Richard Overy explains both the extent of the revision made possible by the knowledge accumulated since 1989, notably thanks to the opening of some Soviet archives following *glasnost*, and the severe limitations still imposed by restricted access to Chinese material. The new edition also takes account of the 'extensive new writing on France in the 1930s'(p. xviii), and it has an updated bibliography and new illustrations. Overall, therefore, readers of the first edition will agree that we have to do with a truly 'new' book. But how new is the historical information it contains ? In a way, this type of question, which seems *prima facie* to be the crux in any new serious history book, is beside the point in this domain.

It can be argued that adepts of the *genre* are not interested in historical facts as such – they are taken as read – but in the interpretation of the facts, in the chain of logic which led from one event to the next, and finally to the outbreak of war in September 1939. In this field, the difficulty of distinguishing between 'the raw facts' as indisputable historical evidence and as weapons used for special pleading is a particularly acute one, and it is as old as the War itself. This reviewer has before his eyes *Documents concerning German-Polish Relations and the Outbreak of Hostilities between Great Britain and Germany on September 3, 1939.*[2] Now, is that wealth of 'primary material' (official speeches, Foreign Office notes, diplomatic correspondence, etc.) to be taken at face value : are the 'indisputable facts' which it contains not to be treated as 'propaganda material'? The same holds true of the French *Yellow Book* of 1939 [3], which the authors quote on p.161. In other words, do these 'documents' not tell us more on what the British and French governments wanted people to 'know' (i.e. believe) than on the actual causes for the outbreak of war ? The 'facts' of the story were already largely known in September 1939 (with notable exceptions like the secret German-Soviet protocol on the division of Poland).

Those who have followed and fueled the debate since 1939 were therefore understandably not interested in the relatively small amount of 'facts' as such, and it would be pointless and unfair to try to establish which (if any) new 'facts' Overy and Wheatcroft have dug up : like their predecessors, their overriding preoccupation was to estab-

lish the perception of events by the participants, and to try to make sense of their decisions in the light of the necessarily limited perception which the actors could only have of the likely consequences of these decisions.

'The road to war' as a *genre* recalls classic tragedy, in which the protagonists only have a dim view of the fate which awaits them and usually precipitate their doom by their own schemes : this is perhaps what makes it so fascinating for its devotees. On that account, *The Road to War* is an outstandingly successful book in that it very convincingly tries to recreate the situation as its contemporaries saw it, all with their different insights or blinkers. In the great A.J.P. Taylor tradition, there are no absolute villains or faultless heroes, but only fickle humans (sometimes unfortunately at the head of powerful states and party machines) hoping to further their selfish interests at minimum cost and according to their very limited lights. Instead of the usual chapters on, say, 'The Rhineland', 'The Anschluss', 'Munich', etc., i.e. a discussion founded on 'histoire evenementielle', in Ecole des Annales parlance, or the other common, 'thematic', approach

('Appeasement', 'Rearmament', etc.), we have an examination of the perception of the situation by the foremost interested parties (with the omission of China for the reasons explained in the Preface) : Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, the Soviet Union, Japan, the United States - these being the titles of the chapters which link the Introduction ('Who Will Die for Danzig?') and the Conclusion ('A War of Great Proportions').[4]

In case anyone objects that it is most surprising that Poland should have been left out, let it be said that the Introduction is largely devoted to the Polish position, in particular to Beck's reasoning. Beck, who is often blamed for his obduracy (verging, it is implied, on stupidity) in refusing to allow Soviet troops to enter his country preventively, is shown here as a calculating patriot who was 'dismissive of German strength' and 'gambled that when Hitler saw the real risk of war he would stand back' (p. 12). Before one says that this is only one more element showing his stupidity, one should read the chapter on 'Germany', and especially the page devoted to Hitler's despondency when he learnt about the formal Anglo-Polish alliance on 25 August 1939 following the German-Soviet Pact on the 24th (p. 69) : it is clear that, according to Overy and Wheatcroft, Beck's 'gamble' had not been that stupid after all. Moreover, Hitler was not intoxicated, but 'stunned' by the British and French Declarations of War on 3 September : 'It took time for Hitler to realize that for the first time since his charmed diplomatic life had begun in 1936 he had miscalculated. For a while he argued that the declarations were merely a sham to avoid losing face. There would be no fighting, he told Speer' (pp. 70-71).

We could continue with a list of the minor or major 'revisionist touches' in the same vein in which the book abounds when it gives its interpretation of the policy of the other protagonists, but one must not deprive the reader of the pleasure of appreciating them by himself. Instead, it is perhaps better to draw attention to the Conclusion which is in itself a superb short history of mentalities in the inter-war-years. Rounding up all their interpretations of the policies followed in the various countries, the authors very convincingly integrate them into a general picture of the world as it was seen by its contemporaries. Overy and Wheatcroft have no illusions about the 'Good War' as perceived by the general public. They accept that 'Fascism was for Western populations by 1939 a demonstrably evil cause', but 'the conflict at the end of the 1930s was really about national rivalry and great-power status as much as it was about ideology' (p. 362).

A puzzling aspect of the authors' analysis is that they attribute a large part of the renewed antagonism between nations during the inter-war-period to distance and lack of contact before the generalization of foreign travel and the advent of the 'global village' : this appears to be a very unconvincing argument today, when on the contrary the old saying that 'familiarity breeds contempt' seems to be verified in all the trouble-spots of the world. Surely 'the road to war' can be found just as much by daily contact as it can be by prolonged ignorance of one's neighbor? - not a reassuring thought.

Notes

[1]. First edition : London : Unwin Hyman, 1986. Second Edition: London & New York : Routledge, 1999.

[2]. Command 6106. London : HMSO, 1939.

[3]. Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres. *Le Livre jaune francais : Documents diplomatiques francais, 1938-1939. Pieces relatives aux evenements et aux negociations qui ont precede l'ouverture des hostilites entre l'Allemagne d' une part, la Pologne, la Grande-Bretagne et la France d'autre part.* Paris : Imprimerie nationale, 1939 (English Edition : *France talks with Hitler. The Story of the Allies' Struggle to avert War, based on the Diplomatic Documents contained in the French Yellow Book.* London : Hutchinson, 1940).

[4]. The phrase comes from Goering in 1938 (p. 344).

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