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The Third Reich as Rogue Regime

Adam Tooze's Wages of Destruction

Dylan Riley

University of California, Berkeley, Department of Sociology

riley@berkeley.edu

Abstract

What was the connection between the structure of the German economy in the 1930s and German aggression in World War II? Adam Tooze's *Wages of Destruction* forcefully poses this issue, but fails to adequately resolve it. Instead, on this decisive question, his analysis oscillates uneasily between two equally unconvincing models: rational-choice theory and cultural determinism. This surprising explanatory failure derives from an inadequate theorisation of German imperialism as the expression of the combined and uneven development of the German economy and society in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Keywords

fascism – war – imperialism – economic development – ideology

Summary

Adam Tooze's deeply impressive *Wages of Destruction* has not had the discussion it deserves. Reception divides fairly evenly between journalistic puff, and often acute but somewhat narrowly focused academic criticism. Yet the text raises fundamental issues, above all for this journal. For, although Tooze's argument is quite clearly materialist, it eschews and indeed is highly critical of the various broadly Marxist interpretations of the Third Reich (such as those of Mason¹ and Neumann)² that seek to explain its evolution in terms

1 Mason 1995.

2 Neumann 1966.

of a perverse social compromise which dictated first the strategy of *Blitzkrieg* (Poland, France) and then *Vernichtungskrieg* (Barbarossa). This is because Tooze's intellectual perspective is rooted in neoclassical economics rather than historical materialism. It is not classes and their struggles but world-markets and their exigencies that form the core of *Wages'* analysis. Tooze interprets the Nazi elites and especially Hitler just as would any good institutional economist; these were rational agents operating within a context of partly self-imposed and partly given constraints. Thus, argues Tooze, given that the Nazi elite saw a global struggle for world dominance with the West as inevitable, its members doggedly and brutally, but fundamentally rationally strove to remove the serious obstacles in their path.³ How successful is the account? In one sense it is enormously so. For the powerful narrative drive of Tooze's book, unusual for such thoroughly-grounded economic history, flows from this theoretical stance. Tooze interprets Hitler's actions as a series of constrained choices producing a number of unforgettable set-piece discussions of the options facing the Nazi elite at decisive turning points. *Wages'* reconstruction of the decision to invade Poland, the *Blitzkrieg* against France, and the invasion of the Soviet Union all make for very engaging, and often deeply informative, historical drama.

Tooze organises his account into three sections. The first focuses on the Nazi recovery: the years from 1933 to 1936, and argues that Germany in the thirties was saddled with an unproductive agriculture, a low level of mass consumption, and unimpressive labour productivity.⁴ The Third Reich was able to do little to transform this situation. The focus of National Socialist economic policy was instead to build the *Wehrmacht* as a means for conquering a massive land empire that would then provide American standards of living to the population. As Tooze puts the point, 'At a strategic level, guns were ultimately viewed as a means to obtaining more butter, quite literally through the conquest of Denmark, France and the rich agricultural territories of Eastern Europe'.⁵ But this strategy required large imports of raw materials leading the regime to restrict domestic consumption in an attempt to address balance of payments problems.⁶

The second section of the book, 'War in Europe', attempts to account for why Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and France in 1940. The basic thesis of these chapters is that the economic realities of the rearmament drive after 1936,

3 Tooze 2007, pp. 321, 663, 668.

4 Tooze 2007, pp. 138–43.

5 Tooze 2007, p. 163.

6 Tooze 2007, p. 151.

in addition to the changing international context, locked the regime onto a path to war. There was no clear answer to the question of what was to be done with the armaments capacity 'once the targets for the accelerated build-up had been met'.⁷ Reconversion to civilian production at this point would create 'serious unemployment'.⁸ Having embarked on rearmament then the regime needed a definite date for war.

A worsening international climate exacerbated these internal pressures. According to Tooze, the horrors of *Kristallnacht* had begun to stiffen international resistance, especially from the Americans who came close to imposing sanctions.⁹ In reaction to this response, anti-Semitic propaganda in Germany took an increasingly anti-American turn. Further, more conventional National Socialist diplomacy had also failed by 1939. Ribbentrop's project was to build a system of alliances through Eastern Europe centred on Poland and a global alliance with the Japanese and the Italians.¹⁰ But none of these diplomatic initiatives bore fruit. It was the explosive combination of the internal pressures created by rearmament and international hostility that lay behind Hitler's decision to invade Poland, in the full knowledge that this would likely unleash a European war.

Tooze argues that similar considerations were at play in the invasion of France in the summer of 1940. After the outbreak of war, Germany faced an immediate crisis of raw-materials supply. The armaments build-up generated enormous inflationary pressures as money was pumped into the economy while mass consumption remained sharply restricted. Further German rearmament had produced a serious balance of payments problem as German firms imported raw materials while the export sector shrank. Strikingly, argues Tooze, German armaments production sharply contracted in the summer of 1939 due to shortages of essential raw materials such as steel and non-ferrous metals.¹¹ Given Hitler's view that war with the Western powers was inevitable, the conclusion was obvious: there was 'nothing to gain by waiting'.¹² Hitler hoped to break out of this bind by rapidly defeating France, and knocking Britain out of the war.¹³

7 Tooze 2007, p. 213.

8 Ibid.

9 Tooze 2007, p. 282.

10 Tooze 2007, pp. 304, 322.

11 Tooze 2007, pp. 311–15.

12 Tooze 2007, p. 316.

13 Tooze 2007, pp. 333–4.

The *Wehrmacht's* invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 was part of the same calculus. Victory in the West had not given the NS-state a sufficient continental platform from which to challenge the US and Britain. The economic contribution of France to the German war effort was small. Given that the arms race was now running against Germany, Hitler was convinced that he had to strike the Soviet Union at the earliest possible moment to establish the resource base from which to fight a long war.¹⁴ As Tooze puts it, 'The real pressures of the global arms race and the imaginary horrors of Hitler's ideological world-view came together in operation Barbarossa, in a synthesis of extraordinary ambition and violence'.¹⁵

The *Blitzkrieg* in 1939–40 and the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 are then best understood as 'rational' steps in the context of this plan whose ultimate meaning was to challenge the United States and Britain for global supremacy. Even the Final Solution and the deliberate starvation of Soviet prisoners of war, according to Tooze, should be understood as part of this broader scheme; 'altering' the demographic balance of Eastern Europe and seizing food supplies was the indispensable economic precondition for fighting the Western powers. The extraction of grain from the *General Gouvernement* (the rump area of Poland not officially absorbed by the Reich in 1939) solved a major food crisis in the summer of 1942.¹⁶

Tooze drives this argument forward with sparkling prose, and an impressive command of the evidence. But analytically its overall effect is somewhat surprising, for it seems to diminish greatly the historical significance of the NS-state: an unpleasant and murderous nuisance surely, but in the grand scheme of things a bump on the road to an ineluctable Atlantic hegemony. The *Wehrmacht* that invaded the Soviet Union is reduced to a 'bedraggled army of horses and Panje wagons',¹⁷ Barbarossa itself the 'belated and perverse outgrowth of a European tradition of colonial conquest and settlement, a tradition that was not yet fully aware of its own obsolescence'.¹⁸ How should these claims be evaluated?

14 Tooze 2007, pp. 334, 430.

15 Tooze 2007, p. 424.

16 Tooze 2007, pp. 547–8.

17 Compare this to Arno Mayer's description: 'The military forces drawn up to invade Russia at 3:15 A.M. on June 22, 1941, were by far the largest and most power-packed fighting machine deployed on any one front for a single operation in the history of organized warfare.' (Mayer 1988, p. 205.)

18 Tooze 2007, p. 511.

Assessment

It is important to underline that *the* central issue of Tooze's book is the connection 'between the extraordinary imperial ambition of Hitler and his movement and the peculiar situation of the German economy and society in the 1920s and 1930s'.¹⁹ The author deserves great credit for posing this question so clearly and forcefully. But does Tooze provide a coherent account of how the social and historical circumstances of Germany in the twenties and thirties relate to National Socialist imperial ambitions? Many eminent historians think so. For example Peter Hayes writing in the *Journal of Modern History* writes, 'Tooze's central argument is that the dynamic aggressiveness of Nazi rule stemmed from the interaction of Hitler's racist and expansionist purposes with his acute awareness of Germany's economic limitations'.²⁰ Stanley Payne, doyen of comparative historians of fascism, states that Tooze 'intimately integrates Hitler's foreign policy with his war economy, and concludes that he progressively altered his original plans as he faced greater foreign resistance'.²¹ This professional praise, however, disguises what is really an analytic vacuum. Indeed no commentator on *Wages* has been able to explain *theoretically* what Tooze's view of the connection between the German economy and Nazi imperialism was. Instead of analysis, ciphers proliferate: 'stemming from', 'interaction', 'intimate integration'.

Given this, it is worth examining with a bit more care Tooze's argument. In general terms *Wages* takes the goals of National Socialist imperialism to be the product of a highly idiosyncratic world-view, which might best be called 'Hitlerine', while the means the regime deployed to reach those aims were highly rational. In its interpretative structure, then, *Wages* is a deeply Weberian book identifying separate, although intertwining, streams of instrumental and substantive rationality (or better, irrationality). How does this work in his argument? To face this issue it is useful to focus on what is arguably the central challenge to any analysis of the dynamics of the NS-state: the invasions of Poland, France, and above all the Soviet Union.

Tooze treats all three as basically instrumentally rational decisions in the context of an overall bid to challenge Atlantic hegemony (a bid that Tooze sees as doomed to fail from the outset). As he puts the point, 'The only adequate response to the American challenge was to create a *Lebensraum* for the German people sufficient to match that provided by the continent of the

19 Tooze 2007, p. xxi.

20 Hayes 2007, p. 463.

21 Payne 2008, p. 33.

United States'.²² War on the continent was therefore a 'means to the end of consolidating Germany's positions for the ultimate confrontation with the Western powers'.²³ In short both *Blitzkrieg* and the *Ostfeldzug* were logical choices given Nazi aims.

However, Tooze embeds this instrumental analysis within a larger ideological context; Nazi war aims themselves, he suggests, were completely idiosyncratic: the expression of Hitler's own highly-individual views. Thus, in the Preface to the book he writes:²⁴

Why did Hitler take this epic gamble [the invasion of Poland in 1939]? This surely is the fundamental question. Even if the conquest of living space can be rationalized as an act of imperialism, even if the Third Reich can be credited with a remarkable effort to muster its resources for combat, even if Germany's soldiers fought brilliantly, Hitler's conduct of the war involved risks so great that they defy rationalization in terms of pragmatic self-interest. And it is with this question that we reconnect to mainstream historiography and its insistence on the importance of ideology.

Or again in the concluding passages of his analysis of 1939, Tooze writes:²⁵

Why then did Hitler press towards war with such furious intensity? Why did Hitler gamble? The pressures of the arms race and the need to exploit diplomatic opportunity go only so far in explaining his actions. An argument in terms of 'windows of opportunity', after all, begs the question of why Hitler had come to see war with the Western powers as inevitable, such that it made sense to opt for the battle 'sooner' rather than 'later'.

Only Hitler's world-view ultimately explains Germany's drive to war; although once this drive was in place an instrumentally rational calculus decisively influenced Nazi tactics. The central theoretical assumption that undergirds this account is that National Socialist imperialism was the outcome of two quite independent chains of causality: a chain leading from Hitlerine ideology to an ambitious attempt at geopolitical transformation, and, given that goal, a set of tactical decisions. Is this a plausible strategy for analysing the actual social

22 Tooze 2007, p. 658.

23 Tooze 2007, p. 430.

24 Tooze 2007, p. xxv.

25 Tooze 2007, pp. 323–4.

and historical processes that generated Nazi imperialism? The analysis can be queried in three main areas: Tooze's treatment of the dominant classes, his account of economic development, and his discussion of Hitler's world-view.

The Dominant Class

One obvious place to look for domestic sources of imperialist expansion would seem to be the dominant classes or social elites of German society in the twenties and thirties. Tooze, however, finds very little evidence of these groups being major drivers of imperialist expansion.

The most extended treatment of the interests of major proprietors of any sort in Tooze's book occurs in Chapter 4 entitled 'Partners: The Regime and German Business'. His central argument here is that German business interests in the thirties were split between the domestic and international spheres. As he writes,²⁶

To simplify for the sake of clarity, the peacetime agenda of the more politically minded elements in German business consisted of two distinct elements, the one domestic, the other international. The domestic agenda was one of authoritarian conservatism, with a pronounced distaste for parliamentary politics, high taxes, welfare spending and trade unions. The international outlook of German business, on the other hand, was far more 'liberal' in flavour. Though German industry was by no means averse to tariffs, the Reich industrial association strongly favoured a system of uninhibited capital movement and multilateralism underpinned by Most Favoured Nation principles.

Roughly speaking, for Tooze, what business got from Hitler was domestic authoritarianism in exchange for autarchy and risk-taking in the international arena. This, in his view, was simply the inverse of Weimar. Although the industrialists found the Weimar Republic 'profoundly unsatisfying', they tolerated its existence because Stresemann's policies allowed them to pursue an international free-trade agenda.²⁷ According to Tooze, then, in the light of their closely-balanced international and national interests industrialists were equally indifferent to Weimar and the NS-state. It is important to recognise that Tooze's interpretation has the enormous merit of allowing him to fully accept the domestic advantages that particular industries gained from the Nazis. In the early thirties with a still anaemic world economy, Hitler's rearmament

²⁶ Tooze 2007, p. 103.

²⁷ Tooze 2007, p. 104.

boom provided large German companies with secure and high rates of return. I.G. Farben's collaboration with the regime over the production of synthetic chemicals and fuel, the healthy profits enjoyed by steel producers, and the hot-house state-sponsored growth of a highly profitable aircraft industry are all well discussed.²⁸ Indeed one of the most eloquent figures in the book graphs the rate of return on capital in Germany from 1925 to 1941, showing a vertiginous rise from 1933 to 1935 with a second smaller spike after 1938.²⁹

But is Tooze's interpretation of the international interests of industrialists during the thirties acceptable? Tooze's evidence for the crucial claim that German business interests were internationally 'liberal' is thin. He argues that extreme nationalists were in a minority in the *Reichsverband der deutschen Industrie* and that the 'association was at best lukewarm in its support of the Reichswehr's efforts at clandestine rearmament'.³⁰ But this claim leaves at least one key question hanging: what were the interests of the decisive leaders of heavy industry such as steel and shipbuilding? Tooze refers to 'the extraordinary arrogance, ambition and nationalism of some of Germany's most serious heavy industrialists'.³¹ Men such as Albert Voegler, Ernst von Borsig and Rudolf Blohm do not seem to have been exactly 'liberal' in their international orientations. The neat balance between domestic authoritarianism and international liberalism appears overdrawn.

This is not to say that German industrialists during the interwar period were intrinsically imperialist. Certainly an export-oriented growth path based on greater international integration would have served their interests well. Yet it is very difficult to see how such a path was at all possible in the thirties. German industry during this period was faced with a set of painful structural constraints. After losing considerable population and territory, and saddled with an unproductive low-income agrarian sector, German heavy industry was continuously plagued by the problem of overcapacity in the decades from 1919 to 1939.³² After the Treaty of Versailles no economy was willing to open its markets to allow German goods to gain export earnings.³³ In short there were enormous pressures within the industrialist camp for German expansion.

A second limitation is perhaps of even greater importance. In all of Tooze's analysis of interest-group politics in the late-Weimar period and under the

28 Tooze 2007, pp. 115–30.

29 Tooze 2007, p. 109.

30 Tooze 2007, p. 104.

31 Ibid.

32 Wehler 2003, p. 242.

33 Wehler 2003, p. 243.

Third Reich the large East Elbian landowners, the Junkers, are discussed hardly at all. This social group, which had been a major support for the conservative nationalism of Alfred Hugenberg prior to the Nazi seizure of power, and which by most accounts dominated the upper reaches of the army and the ministerial bureaucracy, receives no extended treatment in Tooze's analysis. The one mention of large estate holders comes in the context of a discussion of Nazi attempts to protect small producers, where Tooze dryly comments that the leader of the Nazi agrarian programme, Richard Walther Darré, 'was not a popular figure among the Junkers'.³⁴ Indeed the index entry for 'Junkers' refers to the aircraft manufacturer by that name, not the social group.

This is strange, for the ruling classes of pre-World War II Germany were hardly fully modernised. Big landholders, bureaucrats, and military men 'set their own dated terms for admission of bourgeois businessmen and professionals to their relatively closed establishment'.³⁵ To understand the interests of any particular segment of the social elite including the industrialists, it is important to set it within the context of interaction with other segments.

Instead of focusing on the big estate holders, *Wages* turns to the interests of the small 'land-hungry' farmers. Indeed, the chapter focused on them is one of the richest in the book because it shows the extent of rural misery in the 1930s. Small, barely viable peasant farms predominated in prewar Germany according to Tooze.³⁶ The National Socialists tried to shelter this stratum of unviable agrarians through legislation protecting them from debt, establishing patriarchal systems of impartible inheritance, and setting up the massive Reich Food Estate [*Reichsnaehrstand*, RNS] which purchased agricultural products at fixed prices.³⁷ All of this, argues Tooze, tended to drive up agricultural prices and created 'a gap between the consumer aspirations of Germany's urban population and the productive capacities of Germany agriculture'.³⁸ Not surprisingly, suggests Tooze, the most open expressions of Nazi imperial ambitions in the thirties came from leaders associated with this milieu, again exemplified by Darré who in 1936 gave a speech to a group of leading figures in the RNS in which he argued that, 'The natural area for settlement of the German people is the territory to the east of the Reich's boundaries up to the Urals'.³⁹

34 Tooze 2007, p. 284.

35 Mayer 1988, p. 93.

36 Tooze 2007, p. 178.

37 Tooze 2007, pp. 184–6, 194.

38 Tooze 2007, p. 197.

39 Tooze 2007, p. 198.

But what Tooze does not mention in this context is that the Nazis also provided key services to big landlords – as well as small. The National Socialists retained the legal device of entailment that protected large estates, and made no serious moves to break them up. The so-called Hereditary Estate Act of 1933 was aimed at consolidating the position of an already privileged stratum of rich peasants.⁴⁰

The combined impact, then, of this particular interpretation of the German dominant class (where the industrialists are interpreted as ‘international liberals’ and the Junkers are not discussed as an interest group) is to occlude one important potential internal force for external expansion: a dominant class trapped both by a hostile geopolitical framework, and its own backwardness.

German Economic Development

Closely connected to this issue is the question of Germany’s level of economic development prior to the war. On this question Tooze is unequivocal and iconoclastic. Germany, far from being an economic powerhouse, was a ‘middling’ country.⁴¹ It was not an ‘affluent society’ in the twenties and thirties.⁴² ‘On the basis of Germany’s long-run growth trend’, Tooze boldly puts it, ‘Germany was 25–30 years behind the United States’.⁴³ This is the part of Tooze’s argument that has produced, predictably, the most resistance.⁴⁴ It runs sharply against an older revisionist position most forcefully articulated by David Calleo⁴⁵ and David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley.⁴⁶ These authors suggest that German economic development was extremely rapid in the late-nineteenth century. Indeed, despite his assertiveness, Tooze’s position here seems weak. For example, to support his case the author compares Germany in the 1930s to a set of contemporary middle-income countries, writing:⁴⁷

In today’s league table of economic development, the Third Reich would rank alongside South Africa, Iran, and Tunisia. Of course this comparison is strained because early twenty-first-century Iran and South Africa

40 Neumann 1966, p. 395.

41 Tooze 2007, p. xxiii.

42 Tooze 2007, pp. 135, 138.

43 Tooze 2007, p. 144.

44 James 2007; Spoerer 2007.

45 Calleo 1978, p. 60.

46 Blackbourn and Eley 1989, p. 94.

47 Tooze 2007, p. 138.

can import the high technology of more advanced societies, whether it be nuclear reactors, computers or jet aircraft, on terms that were not available to Hitler's Germany. The comparison is therefore flattering to Germany's situation.

The rhetoric here cannot disguise the basic conceptual flaw of this claim. Far from being 'flattering to Germany's situation', this juxtaposition is wildly misconceived. It is meaningless to compare Germany in the thirties to twenty-first-century middle-income countries, unless one also compares the US and Britain in the thirties to this group. Thus Tooze's claim provides no information about how to judge the level of German economic development.

This rhetorical trick, however, is symptomatic rather than decisive. The real flaws in Tooze's analysis lie elsewhere: first in his direct evidence, and second in his interpretation of it.

Let us begin with the direct evidence. Tooze's claims are based heavily on a report produced in 1938 by the Australian statistician Colin Clark. These data show that German GDP per capita was half that of the US over the period from 1924 to 1935.⁴⁸ This seems very much to accord with Tooze's argument. But other evidence presented in *Wages* is not consistent with this view. A table drawn from German government sources presented later in the book shows evidence suggesting that German GDP per capita in 1938 was very close to the figure for the US.⁴⁹ To be sure, an initial look at this table seems to show that German GDP in 1938 was lower than in the US. Adjusted for purchasing-power parity and expressed in 1990 dollars the German figure is 351, against the US's 800. However Tooze, strangely, does not report *per capita* figures for this table although the table does contain population expressed in millions. By simply dividing 1938 GDP by population it is clear that Germany was only slightly behind the US in terms of per-capita GDP.

Tooze nowhere addresses the dramatic discrepancy between these two tables, and as a result the empirical basis for his claims that Germany was a 'middle-income country' remains in doubt. Logically there are three possibilities: Clark's evidence might understate German economic performance, German government statistics might overstate German economic performance, or the German recovery in the late thirties might have been astounding. Note that only the second scenario (that German government statistics

48 Tooze 2007, pp. 136–7.

49 Tooze 2007, p. 384.

were biased toward an overstatement) is really compatible with Tooze's interpretation. But he says nothing about any of this, leading the reader to wonder what evidence is decisive.

More important perhaps than this basic evidentiary question is the conceptual problem of identifying Germany as a 'middle-income country'. GDP per capita does not account adequately for one of the central features of the German prewar economy: its unevenness, what Ernst Bloch called 'unsimultaneity'.⁵⁰ As Tooze himself points out, German GDP per capita was relatively low (to the extent that it was in fact low) due to 'its large and highly inefficient agricultural sector and the substantial tail of small shops and workshops in the craft and service sectors'.⁵¹ By contrast, Germany closely matched Britain in terms of its industrial output.⁵² By the turn of the century, the Germany economy was both 'Europe's most advanced industrial and capitalist society' and 'an old regime'.⁵³ This observation is important because it connects with a potential analysis of imperialism. Barrington Moore,⁵⁴ Friedrich Pollock,⁵⁵ Leon Trotsky⁵⁶ and Franz Neumann⁵⁷ all attempted in various (not necessarily compatible) ways to connect militarism to a problem of excess capacity in industry. Given the collapse of the world market, and also given the fact that German agriculture was not in a position to absorb industrial production as a direct consequence of the unevenness described above, a powerful internal dynamic existed toward external expansion. This could express itself in two ways: as organised pressure for rearmament, and as organised pressure for territorial expansion itself. But, since Tooze's overall account of the German economy remains trapped in a basically linear contrast between 'modernisation' and 'backwardness', he is unable to incorporate systematically unevenness as a potential explanation for German expansionism. Tooze's account of German economic development itself therefore further undermines his attempt to connect Nazi aggression to material circumstances.

50 Bloch 1935, p. 79.

51 Tooze 2007, p. 140.

52 Ibid.

53 Mayer 1988, p. 93.

54 Moore 1993, p. 442.

55 Pollock 1992, pp. 89–90.

56 Trotsky 2001, p. 164.

57 Neumann 1966, pp. 3–8.

Hitler's World-view

A third area of Tooze's work also needs careful critical scrutiny: his interpretation of Hitler's world-view. From Tooze's own perspective this is one of the most distinctive features of *Wages*. As he puts the crucial point:⁵⁸

The real bedrock of Hitlerine ideology was not the strategic schema of *Mein Kampf*. The truly central idea was the inevitability of race struggle. In a general sense this was always in the back of Hitler's mind. But from 1938 onwards, this apocalyptic vision motivating the leadership of the Third Reich increased dramatically in intensity. Specifically, Hitler comprehended the emerging Western coalition against Germany through the lens of anti-Semitism. After Kristallnacht, it was President Roosevelt who increasingly positioned himself as the most public opponent of the Third Reich and he did so in overtly ideological terms.

Thus, while acknowledging the centrality of anti-Communism and the project of Eastern expansionism to Nazi thinking, Tooze insists that the *differentia* of Hitler's project was its ultimately anti-Western thrust. Tooze argues that there was an 'emerging Western coalition' in the summer of 1939 that Hitler could make sense of only in terms a Jewish conspiracy; he therefore came to the conclusion that war was inevitable with the Western powers. Assuming this it was better to fight it sooner rather than later, given the underlying economic realities.⁵⁹

What is to be said about these claims? Four objections suggest themselves. First, and most obviously, they seem to do serious violence to the NS world-view. To begin with, Tooze repeatedly, and surprisingly, discounts the importance of *Mein Kampf* for understanding Hitler's ideology and particularly for understanding his geopolitical views. Thus, '[the invasion of Poland in 1939] signalled the abandonment . . . of the strategic blueprint of *Mein Kampf*', 'The real bedrock of Hitlerine ideology was not the strategic schema of *Mein Kampf*', 'The key to Hitler's ideology was not a particular diplomatic scheme [i.e. that of *Mein Kampf*]'.⁶⁰ This seems distorted, for if there is one relatively clear point to come out of *Mein Kampf* it is that Germany should seek to establish a territorial empire in the East at the expense of Bolshevik Russia. As Hitler put it, 'If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only

58 Tooze 2007, pp. 324.

59 Tooze 2007, pp. 321, 322–5.

60 Tooze 2007, pp. 322, 324, 664.

Russia and her vassal border states'.⁶¹ The point is even more clearly stated in his *Zweites Buch* where Hitler writes that 'it is a piece of luck for the future, that this development [the Russian revolution and subsequent foreign interference] has taken place in this way, because as a result a spell has been broken, which would have hindered us from seeking the goal of German foreign policy in the place where it alone can lie: in the East'.⁶² In short, it seems fairly clear that for Hitler an assault on the Soviet Union was one of his principal political aims. Indeed there seems little reason to object to Mayer's claim that 'eastern expansionism' was one of the 'articles of faith' of the NS world-view.⁶³

Tooze would argue that the geopolitics of Hitler's major doctrinal statements were subordinate to 'The truly central idea... of race struggle'.⁶⁴ But strikingly he provides no textual evidence to show that this was the case. The reason of course lies in the nature of the sources themselves. Neither *Mein Kampf* nor the *Zweites Buch* are systematic treatises in which certain ideas emerge as 'more fundamental'. Of course race struggle is everywhere in these books. But it is impossible to determine their place in a coherent overall intellectual structure. Hitler himself provides the clue as to why when he writes, 'it is essential that the content of what one reads at any time should not be transmitted to the memory in the sequence of the book or books, but like the stone of a mosaic should fit into the general world picture in the mind of the reader'.⁶⁵ In short the search for a more or less 'fundamental' or 'central' *idea* in NS ideology is bound to be fruitless. In its very structure this was a syncretic *mélange* in which different elements emerged at different times: but in which certain central themes, above all eastern expansion, anti-Semitism, and anti-Marxism, were constant.

More broadly it is very obvious that the principal ideological and political enemy of the NS elite as whole was the Soviet Union. To see this, it is enough to contrast the behaviour of the army on the two fronts. It was only on the Eastern front that the *Wehrmacht* executed captured field commanders and systematically starved prisoners of war. Unlike the *Blitzkrieg* warfare of 1940 against France that left basically intact the existing society and led to a regime of collaboration with the local ruling class, the war against the Soviet Union was from the beginning a war against the entire Soviet political class.⁶⁶ This project was enshrined in the horrendous Commissar Order stipulating that political

61 Hitler 1999, p. 654.

62 Hitler 1961, p. 159.

63 Mayer 1988, p. 90.

64 Tooze 2007, p. 324.

65 Hitler 1999, p. 35.

66 Mayer 1988, p. 280.

commissars of the Red Army were to be executed for the fact of occupying official positions.⁶⁷ Among the very first mass-gassings were Soviet POWs, put to death in Auschwitz on 3 September 1941.⁶⁸ The reason for this exponential barbarisation of the war at least in large part was that this was a conflict against what the NS-elite saw as *the* ideological enemy.⁶⁹ Tooze's attempt to argue that Roosevelt and the US had taken over this role from the late thirties fails to convince because there was simply no counterpart to these practices on the Western front.

The second problem with Tooze's account is that it, paradoxically, lends an implausible aura of *instrumental rationality* to the most horrific campaign of the war, and by the same token disconnects the campaign from its social roots in the *Wehrmacht* high command. Tooze of course can neither be accused of whitewashing the *Vernichtungskrieg*, nor of downplaying the Soviet contribution to the defeat of the *Wehrmacht*. Among the most powerful pages of *Wages* is the analysis of the Red Army, which he describes as punching 'several classes above its weight' due to its 'excellent weaponry' rooted in the 'real achievement of Soviet Industrialization'.⁷⁰ He also very forcefully places the horrors of the Judeocide in the context of the larger *Generalplan Ost* whose full implementation would have led to the deliberate starvation of some 30 million people.⁷¹ But where Tooze's analysis badly misfires is his attempt to interpret this in narrowly economic terms as a means to a larger Hitlerine end. For example Tooze interprets the implementation of the 'hunger plan' implemented in Poland in 1942 as a brutal but essentially rational and successful response to an impending food crisis.⁷² The key question here of course is to what extent the food crisis of 1941 was a consequence of the very irrational brutality of the campaign itself. Mark Mazower has posed the appropriate counterfactual with exemplary clarity, writing,

Had Hitler agreed to privatize the collective farms as Rosenberg and his advisers urged, agricultural output might well have risen instead of dropping. But he did not, and the great granary of Europe never fulfilled its promise.⁷³

67 Mayer 1988, p. 210.

68 Mayer 1988, p. 367.

69 Nolte 1966, p. 357.

70 Tooze 2007, p. 489.

71 Tooze 2007, p. 538.

72 Tooze 2007, p. 548.

73 Mazower 1998, pp. 153–4.

Such questions serve to underline the decisively ideological character of the war in East itself: the extent to which it cannot be treated as an intermediate step in a grander strategic plan. In his insistence on interpreting Barbarossa as a step toward the larger confrontation with the West, Tooze sharply underestimates its centrality to the Nazi world-view.

Tooze's interpretation has a second, and more perhaps more important effect; it makes Barbarossa appear to be part of a highly idiosyncratic Hitlerine project aimed at challenging the West, rather than part of a long tradition of imperial expansion toward the East. But the drive to the East was not at all idiosyncratic within the German social elite.⁷⁴ In particular, the invasion of the Soviet Union with the dual aim of eliminating 'Judeobolshevism' and winning a land empire, far from indicating a break between the regime and its erstwhile privileged collaborators, 'marked', in Arno Mayer's words, 'the culmination of the unforced collaborations between the Nazi leadership and the traditional elite'.⁷⁵ In sum, Hitler's most distinctive military decision, and the campaign that led ultimately to the Judeocide had a clear social basis in the German elite.

Third, the claim that the real enemies of the NS-state were the United States and Great Britain accords very oddly with many of the key strategic decisions made in the early years of the war. Most obviously if the Anglo-American powers were the ultimate target of Nazi grand strategy, why did Hitler not prioritise confronting them? One dimension of this question turns on the role of the navy: the only weapon that could directly be brought to bear against the US. As Keegan has emphasised, after the fall of France there was a serious struggle between it and the *Wehrmacht*.⁷⁶ Tooze states that Hitler established the basic thrust of German armaments policy, favouring land and air power at the expense of sea power in the months around the invasion of Poland.⁷⁷ Most scholars have interpreted this to indicate the priority of an Eastern strategy from the very beginning. Tooze suggests, in contrast, that the focus on the army, and the Soviet invasion that it clearly implied, reflected the difficulties that the Nazi leadership faced in trying to confront its ultimate enemy: the West. The *Wehrmacht* had already proven its effectiveness against France and there was little hope of Germany being able to overtake Anglo-American sea power in material terms. What was required instead was a continental empire

74 Mayer 1988, p. 203.

75 Mayer 1988, p. 351.

76 Keegan 1989, pp. 127–41.

77 Tooze 2007, p. 338.

carved out of the Soviet Union, as the precondition for a 'continental struggle' afterwards.⁷⁸

The central problem with this interpretation is that it cannot explain Hitler's Mediterranean policy. For in North Africa Hitler did have an opportunity to confront the British with the *Wehrmacht* to devastating effect. A successful drive through Egypt would have dealt a crushing blow to the British Empire, and opened the oil fields of the Middle East. But Hitler, famously, starved the *Afrika Korps* in preference to preparing for the onslaught on the Soviet Union. Further he failed to use his full power to coerce Franco into the war on his side, which would have been an obvious thing to do to confront the British in North Africa. It is hard to see how this behaviour can be understood in terms of the interpretation Tooze proposes. Indeed it seems much more natural to reverse Tooze's emphasis, to argue that the campaign in the West was primarily designed to secure the conditions for the invasion of the Soviet Union, not the reverse.

What is really striking about NS-foreign policy is not so much its global ambition, as its provincialism. The Nazi elite never had an adequate programme of global domination. Surprisingly perhaps, it is Theodor Adorno who grasped this most clearly. In *Minimia Moralia* he suggested that,

The German ruling clique drove towards war because they were excluded from a position of imperial power. But in their exclusion lay the reason for the blind and clumsy provincialism that made Hitler's and Ribbentrop's policies uncompetitive and their war a gamble.⁷⁹

As Mayer has argued, the project of winning *Lebensraum* in the East was a bid for continental mastery in Europe. This implied however 'a retreat from *Weltpolitik*'.⁸⁰ Perhaps the clearest expression of the basic narrowness and backwardness of Hitler's outlook was his declaration of war on the United States itself. Although this might seem to confirm Tooze's argument that America was the ultimate target of Nazi aggression, his own discussion of these events leads to a different conclusion. Hitler, according to Tooze, declared war on the United States in order to bind Japan more closely to the Axis alliance and avoid the possibility 'that Japan might come to terms with the United States, leaving Germany to fight Britain and America alone'.⁸¹ Now that Japan had bombed

78 Tooze 2007, pp. 401, 423–4.

79 Adorno 2005, p. 106.

80 Mayer 1988, p. 106.

81 Tooze 2007, p. 503.

Pearl Harbor, 'relief' was 'clearly felt by both the Wehrmacht high command and the Navy'.⁸² But a moment's reflection suggests how utterly unreal this vision was. With no prospect of engaging the United States in any militarily significant way, Hitler exposed himself to American air power in the hope of solidifying an alliance with a second- or third-rate industrial power.

Tooze, to sum up, develops an overly pacific view of the geopolitical interests of the German elite prior to the war, an overly homogenised view of the German economy as 'backward', and an idiosyncratic interpretation of Nazi ideology as aimed primarily against an Anglo-American global enemy rather than a 'Judeobolshevik' local one. The overall effect of this triple distortion is to occlude any deeper connection between long-standing domestic tendencies toward imperial expansion and Nazi grand strategy. German capital's geopolitical interests were 'liberal', the Germany economy 'backward', and Nazi ideology 'anti-Western', unlike that of the German right as a whole. Little wonder then that German aggression has to be explained basically in terms of Hitler's ideology.

Perspectives

It is worth reflecting on the fundamental perspective from which this book is written. The polemical context of *Wages* is one important element in understanding the book's position. For among Tooze's most important interlocutors is the German historian Goetz Aly, whose *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (translated as *Hitler's Beneficiaries*) argued strongly that many ordinary Germans benefited materially from the Nazi war of aggression. Tooze in a sharply formulated editorial in the *Tageszeitung* argued that Aly's thesis failed to take account of the contributions that Germans made to the war effort through enforced savings. One principal aim of *Wages* is to further strengthen this critique of Aly.⁸³ The issues raised by this debate are too complex for this comment, but note the rather narrow terrain over which it is being fought out. Basically the question it raises is: who benefited from Hitler's war? But the discussion does not focus on explaining the aggression itself. It is remarkable that neither Aly, nor Tooze, seriously engage with the dynamics of imperialism. In this they share a common blindness with much

82 Tooze 2007, p. 505.

83 Tooze 2005; see also Aly 2005, pp. 327–32.

contemporary work on fascism written from a variety of political and theoretical perspectives.⁸⁴

To begin to rectify this weakness it is important to concretely situate the interests of particular dominant classes within determinant geo-political contexts. Generally speaking, by the late-nineteenth century a tightening alliance had formed between capitalists, their agrarian allies, and states. This alliance itself was a consequence of increasing competition among capitals as the United States and Germany emerged as major industrial powers. Capitalists, especially in Britain, encouraged their home states to pursue imperial strategies to secure markets and investment opportunities; but by doing so they damaged the interests of foreign capitals. In the period from 1884 to 1945 a historically specific fusion of political aggression and economic competition came to shape geo-political relations.⁸⁵ The politico-economic rivalries that characterised this entire period were of course greatly exacerbated by the rise of the Soviet Union which at a stroke removed a vast zone of potential economic expansion from what was arguably the most dynamic capitalist power of the day: Germany. Is it that surprising that Germany unleashed an aggressive war of expansion following these events? What about the strikingly similar behaviour of the Japanese state, which of course lacked anything like a Hitler, in the thirties?

There is a second important way of positioning Tooze. It is clear that his interpretation of the Nazi economy is deeply Anglo-American: not only 'geographically' but also 'ideologically'. As he puts the point, 'The master-narrative of European economic history in the twentieth century, it turns out, was one of progressive convergence around a norm that was defined for most of the period, not by Germany, but by Britain, which in 1900 was the world's first fully industrial and urban society'.⁸⁶ Tooze's analysis is inscribed therefore within a broader story of conflict between an Anglo-American model, and its various alternatives of which the NS-regime is the most extreme. Nazism was aimed ultimately at the United States understood as 'the malevolent force of world Jewry, cloaked in the garb of liberalism, capitalism and democracy'.⁸⁷ Perhaps the clearest symptom of this perspective consists in Tooze's tendency to see the emergence of a firm anti-German bloc among the Western powers in the late thirties. Indeed in doing so Tooze shifts much of the blame for the outbreak of war onto Soviet diplomacy. Ernest Nolte, certainly no leftist, provides

84 Mann 2004; Paxton 2004; Riley 2010.

85 Anievas 2014; Brenner 2006, p. 86.

86 Tooze 2007, pp. xii–xxiii.

87 Tooze 2007, p. 658.

the most powerful riposte to such a formulation. The Ribbentrop-Molotov pact was due fundamentally to the ‘appalling lack of decision and dilatoriness of Western diplomacy’.⁸⁸ The idea that the outbreak of the war itself was due to Western firmness is quite strange.

But a more important and obvious consideration is the simple fact that, as Tooze’s book itself demonstrates, the Second World War in Europe (although of course not outside of Europe) was overwhelmingly a Soviet-German conflict. The decisive battles of the war were fought in 1941–2 (Moscow and Stalingrad) before lend-lease had any real impact. Far from being a competition between an Anglo-American liberal and democratic capitalist model, and an authoritarian National Socialist one, the Second World War was a struggle between Nazism and Stalinism in which the latter proved to be a decisively superior system economically and militarily, and without whose contribution Europe’s postwar recovery is barely conceivable. From the perspective of historical materialism two tasks remain: first a modern analysis of Nazi aggression which systematically lays out the connections between Germany’s specific pattern of uneven development, and pressures for imperialist expansion; second a reassessment of the significance of the Second World War. It is unlikely that Anglo-American triumphalism would survive either exercise.

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88 Nolte 1966, p. 353.

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