

Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders

Gerhard L. Weinberg

Reviewed by Michael O'Connor

What would have been the fate of the German people if, during World War II, the Allies collectively or separately, had negotiated a peace agreement leaving a Hitler-led government in power? What would have been the fate of the rest of the world?

Gerhard Weinberg is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina. In this fascinating book, he invites the reader to consider these and many other questions from the known and, in some cases, speculative views of the eight principal leaders of the Allied and Axis Powers. He draws his material from a wide range of published sources—his bibliography running to eight pages—but is not afraid to speculate where such material is not available. In this context, he notes that much of the Soviet material and General de Gaulle's wartime records are still not accessible.

The author is not interested in how the war itself developed and there is no discussion of its operational aspects. His interest is in how each of the leaders saw their task and ambitions for the post-war world. Obviously, much of the political dealings during the war were flavoured by those ambitions and these are examined in some depth.

Weinberg devotes separate chapters to Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo on the Axis side, and Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, de Gaulle and Chiang Kai-Shek for the Allies. A chapter that outlines how the world actually did develop in contrast to the ambitions of those leaders completes the narrative.

A post-war Hitler government, whether victorious or not, would have been an unmitigated disaster for the German people. Hitler's demonic ambitions in the field of eugenics and the like were already shaping Nazi Germany before the outbreak of war. It was not merely his nearly completed desire to eliminate the Jewish people but the determination to rid Germany of the weak—or those he considered weak. Thus, by 1939, he had implemented a program to kill off disabled veterans of World War I. Then as the war progressed, he began to kill off disabled soldiers of his own army.

Weinberg implies rather than asserts that a negotiated peace could have left Hitler in power. To this extent, he makes no excuse for the Allies' insistence on unconditional surrender noting that this was eventually of considerable benefit to the German people. By contrast, Mussolini is painted as relatively incompetent and a leader who lacked popular support. Compared with Hitler, his programs were not totalitarian and ultimately he was dismissed by his own Fascist party leadership. As with Tojo in Japan, Mussolini lacked the total control over his own constitutional and political apparatus that Hitler enjoyed.

The Allied coalition was led by men who had significant but not always unified ambitions for the post-war world.

This is probably truer of Roosevelt and Churchill than of Stalin, de Gaulle and Chiang. The book is particularly interesting for the way in which the Allies managed their complex relationships not only in the interest of winning the war but also in reshaping the peace.

Weinberg emphasizes Roosevelt's unsuccessful support in the 1920 presidential election—when he was the Democratic candidate for Vice President—for the League of Nations. This was a crucial factor in his drive for a truly international organisation that became the United Nations. He was intent on making the UN a part of his war-winning strategy as well as a strategy for the future. By contrast, Churchill was less interested in a global collective security body, seeking instead a collection of regional organisations that would be dominant.

Roosevelt was also intent on dismantling the colonial empires, especially those of Britain and France. This led to significant differences over strategy as well as the leaders' visions for the future. Churchill is portrayed, probably accurately, as a holdover from Britain's imperial past with Weinberg noting his falling out with the Conservative Party over its 1930s program of home rule for India.

By contrast, de Gaulle was less conservative than Churchill but still committed to the French Empire, much of which had rallied to his cause. Weinberg perceives de Gaulle as less ambitious for the future, being generally content to restore France's prestige after the disaster of 1940.

Chiang Kai-Shek receives generally sympathetic treatment. In respect of the Allies, he notes that Chiang achieved his important aim of having the unequal treaties of the 19th century abandoned. The treatment is necessarily sketchy but lays the groundwork for a better future assessment of Chiang.

Stalin's primary interest was survival against the Nazi invasion. As the war progressed, though, he set out to build his buffer against a resurgent Germany and ideologically hostile states on all his borders. From time to time, he was concerned that the Western Allies might make a separate peace and his suspicions, sometimes reciprocated, drove much of his policy. As the post-war experience showed, his was an obnoxious ideology and a regime that was at once incompetent and unpopular.

This is a fascinating and readable book. It is complemented by extensive source notes for each chapter, a good bibliography and index. ♦

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