

THE CAUSES OF THE WAR

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THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD

LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE

TORONTO AND NEW YORK

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THOMAS NELSON & SONS LTD
35-36 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.4 ; PARKSIDE
WORKS, EDINBURGH ; 25 RUE DENFERT-ROCHEREAU,
PARIS ; 312 FLINDERS STREET, MELBOURNE ;
91-93 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO ;
385 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK.

First published, 1940

IN MEMORIAM

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MARGARET STOBIE KEITH

AND

MARGARET BALFOUR KEITH

PREFACE

IT is the aim of this work to trace the motives which have induced the German people, under the leadership of a man of disordered genius, to enter into a course of action aiming at world hegemony at the expense of the liberty of thought and action of other peoples, and to indicate the causes of the disintegration of the machinery which was created after the Great War in the hope that its operation would save the world from the recurrence of that grievous disaster. It is doubtless difficult, at a time when German atrocities in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and Russian aggression on Finland, have shocked the public conscience of Europe and America, to escape the tendency to deny or minimize the grievances of Germany, and to ignore or gloss over the errors of the Western Powers. But I have thought it more profitable to adhere to the judgments on the issues dealt with which I have expressed in other works and in correspondence to the *Scotsman* contemporaneously with the events themselves. It is, I think, plain that war might have been avoided, had western statesmen understood earlier and appreciated the candid revelation of himself given by Herr Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and had realized that they must not judge him by the standards of everyday political life. It might also have been prevented, had Herr Hitler ever understood the British character in its fundamental soundness, instead of believing that it was expressed in the social groups frequented by Herr von Ribbentrop or even by the

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most determinedly pacifist of British Prime Ministers. Nor would it have been inevitable, if the British people had realized that great possessions entail great responsibilities ; that a realm acquired by heroic activities cannot be retained by inertia ; and that, while peace may seem to the inhabitants of a satiated country the obvious ideal for man, dwellers in less happily situated lands may see in war the legitimate means of wresting from those unworthy to retain them the living spaces requisite for the life and expansion of a race with higher ideals. If historians ought to place on Germany the major responsibility for the present conflict, they ought nevertheless to add that, had Britain and France remained faithful to their traditions, and had they honourably fulfilled their clear obligations, the conditions which invited German aggression would never have been presented. The war will have been fought in vain, if the peoples do not emerge from it determined that they shall never again allow themselves to surrender principles of international obligation for selfish reasons of immediate advantage.

It would serve no useful purpose to endeavour to define principles to eliminate causes of war, for war is inherent in human nature, but I have noted some of the fundamental difficulties which rule out as practicable solutions the current dogmas of Federal Union and the revival of the League of Nations. As we failed utterly by the peace treaties after the Great War to save the world from any future conflict, so nothing we can do now will assure us lasting peace. But if we consider carefully the causes of the present conflict we may at least hope to avoid in any settlement we achieve the most obvious of the defects of the past.

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Though much light has been cast on the causes of the war by the official publications of the British, French, Polish, and German Governments, there remain serious lacunæ in our knowledge. The decision of the British Government not to publish papers dealing with relations with Germany as regards Czechoslovakia between Munich and March 1939 must be accepted as an admission that nothing passed calculated to impress on Herr Hitler the determination of Britain to secure the independence of that state within her new boundaries. This is confirmed by Lord Halifax's incautious admission on 20th January (promptly censored by the *Bulletin of International News*) that all contentious points arising from the Munich accord were settled in favour of Germany, and by Sir Nevile Henderson's confession in his *Failure of a Mission* (published after this work was written) that Germany did little to honour his friend Marshal Göring's promise to be generous. It was the duty of Britain to uphold Czechoslovakia's interests, and the failure of the Foreign Secretary and the Ambassador alike, and the similar negligence of France, clearly convinced Herr Hitler of the truth of his interpretation of Munich, as the withdrawal of Britain and France from intervention in eastern Europe, and led to his decision to act decisively against Poland.

The decision to withhold the papers on the negotiations with Russia, which were originally promised, leaves no option but to accept the substantial truth of the Russian version, which incidentally is confirmed by the absence of any denial in the *Polish White Book*. That book and the other matter so far published leave us completely in the dark why Poland was left exposed to a German attack,

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which she was patently unable to resist, without the making of Allied arrangements to afford her immediate assistance at least in the form of an effective diversion on the Western Front. The apportionment of responsibility for so grave an error must remain for the future ; Poland seems to have completely overestimated her strength and underestimated that of Germany, while British and French ministers may, like Sir N. Henderson, have unwisely clung until almost the end to the hope that by some miracle Europe would be spared the affliction of a wholly unjustified war.

I have endeavoured to regard German action with as much objectivity as practicable. To denounce Herr Hitler as a "homicidal lunatic" or a "mad dog" when he achieves the subjection of a not obviously reluctant Denmark and establishes a most dangerous hold on a divided Norway, is really inconsistent with national dignity. Nor are efforts to ignore the solidarity of the German people behind their Führer of any value. To deplore the training in false ideals of Nazi youth is legitimate only if we equally condemn the moral and intellectual decadence of our conscientious objectors and their panegyrists, the sophisms of our pacifists in State and Church alike, and the blind subservience of our Communists to M. Stalin. Germany cannot be blamed if she underestimates the courage and virtue of a country whose National Union of Students can arrive at resolutions of the type of those of the Leeds Conference of March 1940.

While considerations of immediate interest explain and may justify efforts to conciliate Italy, it is not incumbent on a detached commentator on events to ignore the prime responsibility in Europe of Signor Mussolini for the de-

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struction of peace and security, or to pass over the abiding hostility of the Duce so conspicuously evidenced in his glorification of the German aggression on Norway and Denmark, and his acceptance of the ludicrous allegations of Herr von Ribbentrop on the 27th April of an Allied intention to invade Norway and of Norwegian readiness to enter the war on the side of the Allies. It is only too plain that Italy's action is in entire harmony with the classical model set in 1899 by the German Emperor, when he instigated the Press to violent denunciations of Britain's action, in the darkest days of the Boer War, in order to blackmail the British Government into surrendering Samoa. It is, unhappily, clear that a strong element of British opinion continues to delude itself into the belief in the fundamental friendship of the Italian people for Britain, and to ignore the solid support of Italian youth for the imperial ideals of the Duce, which can be secured only at the cost of vital injury to the power of France and Britain in the Mediterranean. It is a grave source of weakness in the British war effort that influential bodies of opinion remain deliberate adherents of the illusion that fundamentally there is no essential conflict between the welfare of the British people and the ideals of the German and Italian peoples, as distinct from those of their rulers.

In dealing with Russia, objectivity is extremely hard to attain. A section of British opinion has deliberately renounced all freedom of judgment, and has so completely subjected itself to M. Stalin that it has justified and even extolled the aggression of Russia on Finland. Yet there is not much greater intellectual or moral integrity in those critics of Russia who deliberately shut their eyes to the

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historic fact that for over a decade, when Signor Mussolini and later Herr Hitler were working for the destruction of equilibrium in Europe, the Government of the U.S.S.R., for very good reasons, acted consistently as a factor making for peace. The hostility of these opponents of Russia doubtless was one of the factors which induced the British Government to reject Russian aid in the case of Czechoslovakia, and to overlook the grave crime committed by Poland against Czechoslovakia at that crisis, which created a coldness between Poland and Russia, wholly creditable to the Soviet Government. The same unfortunate attitude to Russia was seen in the failure, after the *volte-face* in British policy on March 17, 1939, to put pressure on Poland to seek reconciliation with Russia, without whose aid her defence against German aggression must be most precarious. Serious as have been to the Allies and Poland the results of the measure of *rapprochement* between Germany and Russia, candour compels the admission that the attitude of Poland, and even in some degree of the Allies, to Russia was such as to render the censure aimed at M. Stalin difficult to justify. His further decision to seize those parts of Poland, inhabited essentially by Slavs closely akin to Russians, was requisite for self-defence, and patently of much value to the Allies. Where censure can be directed without hesitation is the aggression on Finland, when M. Stalin showed himself a peer of Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini as a violator of treaties, a destroyer of peace, and a fabricator of false charges. Yet nothing would be more unwise than to accept the advice of those who urge war on Russia, so long as M. Stalin adheres to non-belligerency. To do so would merely be to play into the

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hands of Herr Hitler, whose propaganda against Bolshevism for long misled, and still in some degrees misleads Conservative and Fascist opinion in Britain. For Britain and France M. Stalin still serves an essential purpose in the obstacle which he presents to the Italian desire to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans.

For the suggestion of this work I am indebted to Mr. H. P. Morrison, Managing Director of Messrs. Thomas Nelson and Sons, who have produced the book with their wonted care. In its execution I have derived valuable help from my Secretary, Miss Patricia Ambrose, and I have to thank my sister, Mrs. Frank Dewar, who discussed with me the problems with which it deals as they arose from time to time.

For the benefit of those to whom original sources are not conveniently available I have referred where possible to the documents printed in *Speeches and Documents on International Affairs, 1918-1937*, edited by me for the Oxford University Press. My references to authors in the notes will indicate the works I have found most useful. Several eloquent pleas for, and plans of, forms of Federal Union appeared only after this work had been printed, but they have not weakened in the least my conviction that it would be a major disaster for this country to entertain any of them, and must involve the dissolution of the British Commonwealth.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,
May 14, 1940.

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