Northern European Overture to War, 1939–1941
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From Memel to Barbarossa

Edited by
Michael H. Clemmesen
Marcus S. Faulkner

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**Gunnar Åselius** is history and military history professor in the Division for Military History at the Swedish National Defence College. He lectures on his fields and strategy. His initial research led to the doctoral thesis *The Russian menace to Sweden: The belief system of a small power security elite in the Age of Imperialism* (1994). The work that led to his chapter in this book was *The Rise and Fall of Soviet Navy in Baltic* (2005). However, otherwise he has spent most of the last decade researching and writing about national post-Second World War professional culture in the article *Swedish Strategic Culture after 1945* (2005), and the general military history of the period in *Krigen under kalla kriget* (2007).

**Hans Christian Bjerg** has been an archivist with the Danish National Archives for 30 years and rose to the position of chief archivist. For nearly four decades he has served as the official historical advisor to the Danish Navy, an activity he combined with lecturing at Copenhagen University and still combines with lecturing in maritime history at the Naval Academy. After having published the key analysis of Danish Second World War intelligence, he turned his attention to Danish naval history. He edited the naval and political memoirs of Vice Admiral Hjalmar Rechnitzer, *Maritime og politiske erindringer 1905–40* (2003). He also authored the Danish Navy 500 years anniversary volume *The History of the Royal Danish Navy 1510–2010* (2010).

**Michael Hesselholt Clemmesen** is a retired army brigadier general who combines his service background with a Copenhagen University history masters degree. He was director of the strategy department at the Royal Danish Defence College and later established, and led, the Baltic Defence College in Tartu, Estonia. He lectures on military history and strategic theories at staff and war college levels. Currently he is a senior research fellow at the Danish Centre for Military History. His latest major publication (with the title translated) is *The small country before the Great War. Danish territorial waters, great power strategies, intelligence and defence preparations during the international crisis 1911–13* (2012).

**Sławomir Dębski** received his PhD in history from the Jagiellonian University in 2002. He holds masters degrees from both the Jagiellonian
University (1995) and Central European University (Budapest, 1993). He is the author of the book on Soviet-German Relations 1939–1941, Między Berlinem a Moskwą. Stosunki niemiecko-sowieckie 1939–1941 (2003). He was awarded the prize for the Historic Book of the Year by the Society of History Book Publishers in that year and the Author of the Year Award by the Przegląd Wschodni (the Eastern Review) in 2004. He served as the Director of the Polish Institute of International Affairs from 2007 to 2010 and since 2010 has been a lecturer at Warsaw University.

Michael Epkenhans is a leading historian of German naval history during and between the two World Wars. His main research focus has been the German Imperial Navy. He was the director of the Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung in Hamburg from 1996 to 2009 and is now the director of research for the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt der Bundeswehr in Potsdam. He authored Die wilhelminische Flottenrüstung 1908–1914: Weltmachtstreben, industrieller Fortschritt, soziale Integration (1991) and Tirpitz: Architect of the German High Seas Fleet (2008). In cooperation with Jörg Hillmann and Frank Nägler he edited Skagerrakschlacht. Vorgeschichte—Ereignis—Verarbeitung, Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte (2010).

Marcus S. Faulkner is currently a teaching fellow in the Department of War Studies, King’s College London and teaches intelligence, strategy and sea power. His main interest is the development of sea power throughout the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the impact of technology and intelligence on decision-making.

Azar Gat is the Ezer Weitzman Professor for National Security in and Chair of the Department of Political Science at Tel Aviv University. He is also the founder and head of both the Executive Masters Program in Diplomacy and Security and the International Masters Program in Security and Diplomacy (taught in English) at Tel Aviv. He took his doctorate from the University of Oxford (1986), and his publications include: A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War (2001); War in Human Civilization (2006), named one of the best books of the year by the Times Literary Supplement (TLS); and Victorious and Vulnerable: Why Democracy Won in the 20th Century and How it is still Imperiled (2010).

Ole Kristian Grimnes is emeritus professor of modern history at the University of Oslo. He has written extensively on subjects relating to
Norwegian history during the Second World War. Among his major works are a treatise on the Norwegian refugees in Sweden during the war, a study of the development of a Norwegian central resistance leadership, and an examination of the political decisions which lay behind Norway's entry into the war.

**Karl Erik Haug** is Associate Professor of History at the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy in Trondheim, where he has been lecturing since 1999. Before that he spent five years as a research fellow at the Norwegian University of Technology and Science (NTNU). His fields of interest and publishing include Norwegian foreign policy, military history and international relations. Haug is in the process of completing a Dr. Philos on Norway and the League of Nations, and his latest book, *Conceptualising Modern War* (jointly edited with Ole Jørgen Maasø), was published in June 2011.

**Toomas Hiio** studied history of law at the University of Tartu, finishing in 1991. He had one term at the University of Helsinki, then two years of Soviet Army compulsory service. From 1993 to 1994 he was deputy head of the research project "Album Academicum Universitatis Tartuensis 1918–1944". Thereafter he was head of the University of Tartu archives for two years. For five years from 1998 he was advisor to Lennart Meri, the then President of Estonia, and then until 2008 the executive secretary of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity. From 2005 he was deputy director for research of the Estonian War “Laidoner” Museum and since 2008 has been member of the board of the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory. He is also a PhD-candidate student at Tartu University.

**Jörg Hillmann**'s main academic focus has been the German navy and especially the history of the interwar period and Second World War. After a period of working and researching at the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt der Bundeswehr in Potsdam, he has returned to his work and career as national and international General-Staff Officer, combining it when possible with new academic work. He has edited in cooperation with others *Erleben—Lernen—Weitergeben: Friedrich Ruge (1894–1985)* (2005). With Michael Epkenhans and Frank Nägler he edited *Skagerrakschlacht. Vorgeschichte—Ereignis—Verarbeitung, Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte* (2010).
Rolf Hobson is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo. He studied at the universities of Oslo, Trondheim and Düsseldorf. Among his publications are Norsk forsvarshistorie 1905–1940: Total krig, nøytralitet og politisk splittelse with co-author Tom Kristiansen (2001); Imperialism at Sea. Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914 (2002) and Krig og strategisk tenkning i Europa 1500–1945 (2005).

Magnus Ilmjärvi is a senior researcher at the Institute of History and a Member of the Senate of Tallinn University. He studied at Tartu University and got his PhD at the University of Helsinki (2004) with the dissertation “Silent Submission. Formation of Foreign Policy of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—Period from mid-1920s to Annexation in 1940”. His present research project is on “Adapting to modernity: The Estonian society’s response to political, social, economic and cultural challenges in times of transformation (16th–20th centuries)”. He has published several articles about interwar politics in the Baltic States.

Tom Kristiansen is a professor at the Norwegian Defence College. He has written extensively on Scandinavian diplomatic, naval and military history in the first half of the 20th century. Kristiansen has a particular interest in the relations between Scandinavia and the great powers. During recent years his focus has been on maritime issues and the defence traditions of small countries. His teaching experience includes the Norwegian Naval Academy and the National Staff College. His latest book is the second part of the history of the Norwegian navy from 1807 to 2008, 1905–1960: Selvstendig og alliert i krig og fred (2010).

Andrew Lambert has been the Laughton Professor of Naval History and Director of the Laughton Naval History Research Unit at King’s College London since 2001. His main work focuses on the naval and strategic history of the British Empire between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War, and the early development of naval historical writing. He has lectured on aspects of his work around the world, from Australia and Canada to Finland, Denmark and Russia, and he wrote and produced the “War at Sea” television series for the BBC in 2004. His latest major publications include Nelson: Britannia’s God of War, (2004); Admirals: The Naval Commanders who made Britain Great (2008) and Franklin: Tragic Hero of Polar Navigation (2010).

Česlovas Laurinavičius is a senior scientific researcher at the Lithuanian Institute of History and lecturer at Klaipėda University. His main academic

**Werner Rahn**, a captain (ret.) in the German Navy, was born in 1939 and joined the Navy in 1960. He holds a PhD in history from Hamburg University. He is author of *Reichsmarine und Landesverteidigung 1919–1928* (German Navy and Defence Policy, 1919–1928) (1976), and several articles on German naval and military history. He is co-editor with Gerhard Schreiber of the facsimile edition of *Kriegstagebuch der Seekriegsleitung 1939–1945* (War Diary of the Naval Staff), Part A, (1988–97). From April 1995 until September 1997 he commanded the Military History Research Office of the German Armed Forces (MGFA) in Potsdam. Since 1997 he has been a freelance researcher and lecturer in military and naval history.

**Palle Roslyng-Jensen** is an Associate Professor of the Saxo-Institute, Department of History, University of Copenhagen. He has a masters degree in history and political science from this university and his Dr. Phil. from the University of Odense in 1980 with the dissertation “Værneenes politik–politiikernes værn” (Studies in Danish military policy 1940–45) (1980). He works on different aspects of occupation history and pre-war and post-war history in military politics, public opinion and media history. His latest publications include the book *Danskerne under besættelsen. Holdninger og meninger 1939–1945* (The Danes and the Occupation. Attitudes and opinions) (2007) and articles on the discursive post-war development on the Danish state collaboration during the occupation and discursive changes on the Danish attitudes to the Soviet Union 1945–48.

**Valters Ščerbinskis** completed a doctoral dissertation on "Finland in Latvian foreign policy during the interwar years" at the University of Latvia. Thereafter, he did research work at the Latvian State Historical Archives. Since 2002 he has been working and lecturing as associate professor docent at the Riga Stradiņš University. His research interests and publications cover the political history of the interwar period in the Baltic States, history of the political elites and academic circles in Latvia, and Latvian relations to the Nordic States during that period.

Boris Vadimovich Sokolov is an economic geography graduate of Moscow State University. He got his PhD in history (1986) and Doctor Habilitus in philology (1992). Author of 63 books on history and philology, some of them were translated into Polish, Japanese, Latvian and Estonian. Among his works are biographies of marshals Tuchachevskij, Zhukov, and Rokossovskij, as well as of Beria and Stalin and the writers Michail Bulgakov and Vladimir Sorokin. He has written books devoted to the history of the Soviet-Finnish War and the Second World War. He is a member of the Russian PEN-Centre.

Jeppe Plenge Trautner entered the Danish Army Reserve in 1987, served with the UN in Kashmir 1992–94, and headed the Department of Defence Management at the Baltic Defence College 1998–2001. A political scientist with a war studies approach, he has travelled extensively in a number of conflict zones. Doing his PhD at Aalborg University, Denmark, he lectured in European security and defence policies there and as visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges. Presently he is a Major and Reserve unit commander with the Danish Air Force, and occasionally lectures on security and defence issues at Tel Aviv University and elsewhere.

Milan Vego is a former Yugoslav naval officer. Dr Vego is presently Professor of Operations, Joint Military Operations Department, at the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. His books cover a wide spectrum of subjects from the fields of naval history and operational theory.

Lars Ericson Wolke is a professor of military history at the Swedish National Defence College, as well as assistant professor of military history at Ábo Academy in Turku, Finland. His considerable academic output includes 25 books, with an emphasis on the history of the Baltic Sea region in the 16th–17th and 20th centuries. He is the Swedish president and board member of the International Commission of Military History, as well as a member of the Royal Swedish Academy for Military Sciences.
The importance of the German ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1939 to surrender the Memelland, the Klaipėda Region of Lithuania, is often overshadowed in Western historiography dealing with the causes and course of the Second World War. Although the fall of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union enabled historians to take a more international view of the events leading to the outbreak of hostilities, narratives are still dominated by conventional approaches to the unfolding events. The Czechoslovakian crisis, the status of Danzig and the deterioration of the German-Polish relationship, culminating in the outbreak of war in September, remain the principle steps on the path to war. From a north European perspective, examining the course of events through such a framework has only a limited degree of utility and tells only part of the story. While the German invasion of Poland remains a key moment in the region's history, it was not the only one that shaped the course of events. Parts of the region had already been engulfed in conflict and parts remained at peace for a number of years. Absolute conditions of peace and war are hard to identify as many states were affected by internal and local conflicts as well as the influence that the great powers exerted on events. While historians have examined northern Europe's role in the path to war, the approach is often one of looking into the region from afar through an outside lens. This methodology overlooks local issues; how local elites perceived the wider developments in the expanding European crisis and how this in turn shaped their actions.

Geographic regions, being subject to a plethora of political, social, cultural and historiographical factors, are notoriously difficult to define. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in northern Europe, which rather than being considered a single region tends to be split into two independent entities by historians—Scandinavia and the Baltic States. With reference to the years 1939 to 1941 this division reflects the establishment of German and Soviet spheres of influence and a tendency to examine the developments in each in isolation to the other. While both Berlin and Moscow did come to dominate the region in the run up to the German invasion of the Soviet Union, events in and around the Baltic were much more closely connected than often portrayed.
Although the root causes of the events of March 1939 may be traced back to previous months and years, this is a natural point from which to chart the region’s transition from a period of relative peace to one engulfed in total war following the launch of *Barbarossa* in June 1941. Indeed, it is important to note that the period of peace in northern Europe between the two World Wars was relatively short. The German challenge to British maritime dominance of the North and Baltic Seas had only ended two decades earlier with the scuttling of the High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow. Just over 19 years had passed since Germany had relinquished its bid for control of Courland, Riga and Lithuania after the French army under Marshal Foch threatened to cross the Rhine. The new Danish-German frontier, another source of conflict dating back to the previous century, had also only been in place for a similar amount of time. Poland’s borders were younger still, having only stabilised in the aftermath of the Polish-Soviet War and after the League of Nations abandoned the plan for a plebiscite in the Vilnius region. Lithuania’s borders had only been settled 16 years earlier after the occupation of the Memelland in the winter of 1923. The Soviet threat to Estonian and Latvian independence was only removed after the failure of a Soviet coup attempt in Tallinn in December 1924.

In the aftermath of these post-Armistice conflicts, long-term preparations for a future war, which many European politicians and military leaders believed to be inevitable, began. Germany and the Soviet Union in particular commenced such planning and, until 1933, cooperated in many areas. With the National Socialist accession to power in January of that year, this pragmatic cooperation rapidly came to an end and was replaced by an expectation on both sides that the other would most likely be the main enemy in such a war. Both sought to re-establish control of their former territories, as well as in the long term to secure further lands at the expense of each other’s positions. By contrast, the Scandinavian states did not initially feature in German and Soviet plans. To Hitler these only became important once his desired accommodation with Britain, on the basis of an agreement to curb German naval armaments, failed to provide him with London’s approval of German expansion in the east.

During 1939 both Hitler and Stalin accelerated plans and practical steps to improve the geostrategic positions of their states and the access to the primary resources necessary to underwrite the looming war. This process was marked by the “Fourth” Partition of Poland-Lithuania that in turn began with the March annexation of the Memelland and was completed by the Soviet invasion of eastern Poland in the second half of September. From then on, the German and Soviet paths differed
somewhat. Hitler’s attention, discreetly coached and manipulated by the German navy which had long harboured designs on the west coast of Scandinavia, turned to the north as a means of improving Germany’s geo-strategic position for a trade war against Britain’s sea lines of communication. Meanwhile, Stalin sought to use the time afforded by Germany’s westward pivot to deal with France and Britain to secure Soviet control over Tsarist Russia’s former Baltic possessions and to prepare the Red Army for an inevitable clash against Germany.

The purpose of this anthology is to chart the policies and actions of the great powers in northern Europe over the 27-month period during which the conflict escalated from a regional skirmish to a world war. Equally, it is important to understand how these moves were gauged and acted upon by the medium and small powers around the periphery of the Baltic Sea. Ultimately, all except for Sweden, which managed to secure its neutrality throughout the conflict by a combination of adaptation and ever more robust defence, would become victims of German and Soviet aggression. The structure here deliberately breaks with regional or thematic approaches to the outbreak of the Second World War to provide an international perspective on the causes and outbreak of the war in northern Europe. Traditionally, the deterioration of Soviet-Finnish relations, culminating in the Winter War, is the main focus within the Baltic region of narratives dealing with the European war in 1939 and 1940. Owing to the considerable amount of literature devoted to the Winter War, it is not the subject of a single chapter in this volume. However, the political and military effects of the war as they were felt by the Baltic States and Sweden are covered in a number of ways.

This volume stems from a conference hosted by the Royal Danish Defence College, Copenhagen in June 2010, the object of which was to focus on the Baltic and North Sea collectively and in an equal manner. Beyond being constrained by geographic boundaries like “Scandinavia” or the “Baltic”, previous interpretations of the path to war in northern Europe have been focused on either diplomatic, operational-tactical or, to a lesser extent, strategic aspects. The book endeavours to add new insights in a number of ways. Firstly, it joins the developments in and around the North Sea with those in the Baltic. The course of events in northern Europe was dominated by two questions, the Anglo-German contest for control of the access to the Atlantic Ocean and the Soviet-German contest for control of former territories as a precursor to an ideologically motivated clash. Both contests need to be considered together to understand how war came to northern Europe. Secondly, rather than adopting a
conventional time frame, the one chosen here is more appropriate to the region and provides a new perspective. The contributors were also asked to consider the limitations imposed upon the decision-makers of the region's medium and small powers who were constrained by resources and did not have the benefit of knowing how the various crises would unfold nor what action the great powers would take. Finally, this is an international history of northern Europe on the threshold of war which draws upon much scholarship and source material not previously available in English.

The volume is divided into five parts which provide a largely chronological account of the events set into context by means of thematic chapters at the outset and historiographical examinations that examine post-war debates and memory of the events. Part I deals with the three principle great powers, Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union, and their approaches to the region. Azar Gat's chapter examines the general premises and perceptions that shaped the policy and grand strategy of the Western democracies before and during the crisis period 1938–41. Jeppe Plenge Trautner's chapter provides a theoretical supplement to Gat's essay, delivering an explanation of why decision-makers took certain courses of action and what guided the process. Uniquely among the chapters, Plenge's approaches its subject from the perspective of a political scientist which enables a different perspective on the sorts of factors that shaped the decisions of Western politicians and military leaders alike.

Andrew Lambert provides an overview of British maritime strategic thinking and the offensive plans which were developed for the Scandinavian theatre to secure Allied sea control, the free flow of global maritime trade, Allied initiative in the war and the weakening of the German economy by cutting overseas trade and, most importantly, the importance of raw materials from Scandinavia. The chapters by Boris Sokolov and Gunnar Åselius deal with Soviet strategic motives and naval preparations in the Baltic area respectively. The development of German policy toward northern Europe is covered by Michael Epkenhans's essay and Jörg Hillmann's analysis of German maritime thinking and naval strategy in the interwar era.

Part II focuses on 1939 and the events surrounding the Fourth Partition of Poland-Lithuania and the effects of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on the region. Česlovas Laurinavičius examines the Lithuanian reaction to the loss of Klaipėda and the acquisition of the Vilnius region in compensation. Sławomir Dębski's chapter analyses the Polish perspective and in addition provides an "eastern" view of the final stage on the path to war by
Outlining Soviet and German moves throughout the final weeks of peace, Magnus Ilmjärv and Valters Ščerbinskis consider the Estonian and Latvian positions and reactions to the outbreak of the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland.

Part III deals with the events of 1940 and the German invasion of Denmark and Norway. While the events of Weserübung form an integral part of any general narratives of the war, the treatment here considers both the long- and short-term factors. Although the Scandinavian powers lacked the capability to stand up to the great powers individually, cooperation and the pooling of resources provided an option to ensure their security and deter great power intervention. In spite of notions of collective security existing, ultimately little was achieved. Karl Erik Haug’s chapter examines Norway’s half-hearted relationship with the League of Nations, while Tom Kristiansen considers Norwegian perceptions of the threats to national security and the implications for strategy. Hans Christian Bjerg provides a Danish perspective by examining the case of the Danish Commanding Admiral, who was forced to retire as result of his navy’s passivity during the German invasion. Michael H. Clemmesen’s chapter outlines the operational concerns that informed the German navy’s lobbying for the occupation of Denmark and Norway, with a study of the development of the armoured commerce raider as a weapon to interdict maritime trade.

Werner Rahn and Milan Vego analyse the mechanics of the actual German invasion. Marcus Faulkner and Ole Kristian Grimnes deal with the immediate consequences of Weserübung. The former chapter explores the implications for British strategy and helps to explain why, after June 1940, Britain could no longer exert any influence in northern Europe. This allowed Germany and the Soviet Union to dictate the course of events and solidify their control of the Baltic shores. Grimnes’s chapter explores the two Norways that emerged as a result of the invasion and the divisions this created. One Norway came under German occupation while the other existed in exile, composed of the civilians and military personnel who had escaped or lived abroad.

Part IV deals with the Soviet preparations during 1940 and 1941 at the eastern end of the Baltic. Toomas Hiiro examines the build-up of Soviet forces in Estonia. Lars Ericson Wolke provides a view of this development as seen through Swedish eyes in his chapter on Swedish military intelligence. Ultimately Sweden was the only northern European state that managed to keep itself out of the war. This chapter provides an important addition to the existing literature which focuses on the political and...
diplomatic angles by examining Sweden’s military perception of the threats it faced.

Part V addresses the historiography and how the consequences of the war affected the region for decades, with debates continuing to surround issues of responsibility and guilt. Equally important within this context are the discussions about alternative options. Rolf Hobson’s chapter on *Weserübung* explores the impact, causes and nature of the German invasion of Norway and how Norwegian and German military historians viewed the war. Palle Roslyng-Jensen examines the various stages in Denmark’s attempts at understanding a very humiliating period in Danish history. Alfred Erich Senn explores a much understudied aspect of the history of the Baltic States—that of how historians have dealt with the period 1939–40. It shows how this “earlier” wartime period is remembered, overshadowed by wartime events and contemporary politics, remaining divisive until today.
PART I

THE GREAT POWERS AND THEIR APPROACHES TO THE REGION
CONTAINMENT AND COLD WAR BEFORE THE NUCLEAR AGE: 
THE PHONEY WAR AS ALLIED STRATEGY 
ACCORDING TO LIDDELL HART

Azar Gat

This chapter will try to bring out the most general premises and perceptions that underlay the Western democracies’ defence policy and grand strategy before and during the crisis period 1938–41. I argue that these premises and perceptions were unique to the democracies. They were not explicitly defined as a doctrine at the time, and are still not fully recognised today. But they were very much in the air, decisively shaping policy; and they have continued to underlie strategic policy in the democracies throughout the Cold War and into the present.

The man who most systematically formulated all this in the language of strategic doctrine, as early as the 1930s, was the famous British military theorist and commentator B.H. Liddell Hart, and I will use him as a prism to bring the subject into focus. In the second half of the 1930s, as he became the defence correspondent for The Times, unofficial adviser to the Secretary of State for War, Hore-Belisha, and regularly briefed senior politicians of all parties, his influence reached its peak.

The 1930s were the period when liberal democracies’ distinctive attitude to war, which we all sense very acutely nowadays, was crystallised. The actions of Japan, Germany and Italy against the international status quo posed acute threats to the West. Nevertheless, in all the Western liberal great powers—the United States, Britain, and France—the public mood was unmistakably against involvement in another large-scale war. Indeed, rather than merely responding to its electorate, the majority of the political elite itself genuinely felt that a repetition of anything like the First World War—involving a massive loss of life and wealth—might spell the end of civilisation, was too horrible to contemplate, and was wholly out of the question. But then, if major war was ruled out as a viable policy option by the Western liberal democracies, which at the same time were unwilling to forfeit what they saw as their vital interests, what were the alternatives? I suggest that the options developed then (and remaining with us today) were isolationism and appeasement, containment and cold war, limited war at most, in that order. Typically, all the liberal great powers trod this road.
Isolationism was the first option of those who felt themselves able to embrace it successfully; the British only toyed with the idea and then adopted half-way isolationism in the shape of “Limited Liability” regarding the dispatch of ground forces to the Continent; the United States espoused it more fully and for a longer period. However, in view of the magnitude of the threats, isolationism in itself was deemed to be insufficient. Both countries augmented it with attempts to lessen the conflict and tame the Axis powers, especially Germany, by meeting some of their grievances and offering them economic rewards and mutually beneficial trade deals. This so-called policy of appeasement failed, and earned notoriety, when pursued wholesale by Neville Chamberlain. But those who opposed Chamberlain’s policy did not object to appeasement per se but believed it had to be more circumspect and buttressed by force. During the Ethiopian and Spanish crises there was still little appetite for action among the Western democracies, and too small a perceived threat. It is interesting, though, to note the type of strategies that were suggested as a counter to the Axis’s moves. They included economic sanctions, the isolation of both Ethiopia and Spain by the Allies’ vastly superior naval power, and the massive supply of armament to the Ethiopians and to the Spanish Republicans. The failure of the half-hearted steps that were finally taken must not mislead. The alternative was not to send in Allied troops. Rather it was the Axis forces, entangled in remote and exceedingly difficult theatres of war, that could be made to meet their Vietnam or Afghanistan.

President Roosevelt’s forming trend of thought in respect to both Europe and the Far East is typical here, even though his ideas were hazily defined. The president increasingly aired the notions of a coordinated policy of sanctions and containment against the aggressors, an idea first embodied in his famous “quarantine speech” of 5 December 1937. As Roosevelt told both his Cabinet and the British ambassador: “We want to develop a technique which will not lead to war. We want to be smart as Japan and Italy. We want to do it in a modern way.” During the Czechoslovakian crisis, Roosevelt called for a “siege” of Germany. He suggested that the Allies close their borders with Germany, even without declaring war, and stand on the defence, relying on the economic blockade to do the job. Offensive actions would only result in “terrific casualties”.

The strategic concept emerging in all this was defensive in aim and based on containment and deterrence, economic coercion, peripheral war by proxy, blockade and limited war, in that order. I suggest it underlay much of the Allied thinking—both official and unofficial—in the years to
come. I divide the period from 1938 to 1941, into three phases: from the Czechoslovakian crisis to the outbreak of the war; from the outbreak of the war to Germany’s conquests in northern and western Europe; and the period when Britain stood alone until the Soviet and American entry into the war.

The Czechoslovakian crisis is our starting point, and the strategic ideas mooted during this crisis were unmistakable. Eden, Lloyd-George, Churchill, the British Labour and Liberals, all held, like Roosevelt, that Germany had to be contained by a superior coalition (incorporating the Soviet Union) capable of deterring Germany or, failing that, strangling her economically. In 1938, before her expansion into eastern and then western Europe, Germany completely lacked the resources necessary for waging a protracted general war, as her army’s chiefs desperately pointed out.

Czechoslovakia was geographically isolated from the Western Allies and there was virtually nothing Britain and France could do to directly assist in her defence. And yet, Liddell Hart assessed at the time that rather than being an embarrassing liability, Czechoslovakia was one of the most vital elements of Britain’s security system. The point, as he saw it, was that the Western Allies were simply too weak to defeat Germany on the battlefield in any given time-scale. Their sole potent weapon of deterrence and coercion against Germany was the blockade, which, despite her efforts to achieve autarky and develop ersatz goods, her highly industrialised economy could not withstand for very long. Over 66 per cent of Germany’s ores for steel production came from abroad, as did 25 per cent of her zinc, 50 per cent of her lead, 70 per cent of her copper, 90 per cent of her tin, 95 per cent of her nickel, 99 per cent of her bauxite, 66 per cent of her oil, 80 per cent of her rubber, and 10–20 per cent of her foodstuffs. In the age of mechanised warfare, Germany’s shortages in certain key raw materials such as oil and metals for the aircraft industry made her even more vulnerable to the blockade than she had been during the First World War. The great question confounding British decision-making in the late 1930s, namely what Hitler’s and Germany’s future intentions might be, did not matter to Liddell Hart at all in weighing the issue. As he saw it, Germany could not be effectively stopped, not even by a disastrous total war, once it broke loose of its restricted territorial and resource base. The sacrifice of the Czechoslovakian bastion would bring all the countries of the Danube basin, with their agricultural and mineral wealth, within German reach, and give Germany the ability to sustain a prolonged war. Like the breach of a dam, concessions to Germany in south-east Europe implied on Britain’s part the forfeiting of its only potent weapon and the total collapse
Indeed, after Munich both Romania and Yugoslavia had no choice but to concede to a series of economic treaties which gave Germany priority in exploiting their highly important oil, mineral and food resources. By occupying the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Germany considerably expanded her economic base and enriched her meagre reserves of foreign currency and raw materials. Germany also incorporated the thriving Czech arms industry, of which the Škoda and Zbrojovka factories in particular were among the world’s best, making Czechoslovakia the fourth largest exporter of arms. The military equipment captured in Czechoslovakia in vast quantities was found sufficient to equip 20 new German divisions, including three Panzer, armed with the Czech T35 and T38. During the 1940 campaign in the west, some 40 per cent of the German medium (gun-mounted) tanks were Czech models. And all this before counting the loss of the strong and modern Czechoslovakian army, numbering 1,250,000 soldiers in 34–35 divisions, 1,200 aircrafts, more than half of which of the first line, 700 tanks, 2,200 field-guns and 2,500 anti-tank guns, with heavily fortified frontiers.

Soviet cooperation was the most significant condition for a successful war against Germany. Like the Conservative, Labour and Liberal opposition to Munich, which he advised and with which he cooperated, Liddell Hart valued Soviet cooperation highly and feared the consequences on the Soviet Union’s position if Czechoslovakia was abandoned. For Liddell Hart, as for Churchill and the rest of the opposition to Munich, this was not a matter of ideology but simply a question of the balance of power. He was fully aware of the difficulties the Soviet Union would encounter if she wished to support Czechoslovakia. The two countries had no common frontier. The Poles were unlikely to grant the Red Army free passage through their territory. Even if the Romanians were to allow such passage, communications through the Ruthenian corridor were narrow and poor. Soviet military might had just been severely weakened by the liquidation of around half of its officer corps in the great purges of 1937–38. And last but not least, it was not clear how trustworthy the Soviet Union was. Its paramount fear of isolation vis-à-vis Germany made it anxious to cooperate with the West in the mid-1930s, a goal expressed in the double policy of “collective security” and “popular fronts”. But by 1938 disappointments over Abyssinia and Spain had substantially cooled the Soviet attitude, for indeed, Chamberlain ruled out cooperation with the Soviet Union, which he distrusted and detested even more than he did Germany.
In retrospect it seems that the prospects of containing Germany were best during the Czechoslovakian crisis. The fear of a general coalition war against Germany following a German attack on Czechoslovakia was the nightmare of the German General Staff. Chief of Staff Ludwig Beck resigned on 21 August after having failed in his efforts to reverse the course of German policy. He judged that the Allies would not launch major land offensives against Germany, but insisted that in the long run they were bound to strangle her economically. Similar views were widely held by other senior German officers. Beck’s successor, Franz Halder, and his allies in the German army and officialdom conspired to depose the regime if the order to attack were given. The apologetic nature of the German generals’ postwar testimonies, their own nationalist political views, and doubts regarding the prospects of any successful attempt against the Nazi regime made historians sceptical towards the German opposition to Hitler. All, however, agree that the pre-Munich situation—before Hitler’s bloodless victory proved him smarter than anyone—was the most serious internal threat to his leadership. Munich marked a watershed. Unlike many of his contemporaries, and many historians later on, who argued that Munich at least earned Britain and her allies time to prepare for war, Liddell Hart did not doubt that the balance of power had changed drastically for the worse. Germany’s power base expanded, and her economic ability to wage a long war increased; and the Soviet Union was given the cold shoulder by Britain and the West.

The Soviet attitude was, of course, the decisive factor during the Polish crisis and countdown to the war. Reversing their previous assessment, the British chiefs of staff now maintained, as Liddell Hart had done all along, that if Poland and the whole of eastern Europe were to be defended from Germany, Soviet cooperation was vital. And yet, although opening talks with the Soviets, the British government remained ambivalent and non-committal. As the Soviets switched sides and concluded their pact with Germany in late August 1939, Liddell Hart assessed that the strategic balance had changed completely. In the first place, nothing could now prevent Poland from being overrun by Germany; on this he was in agreement with professional opinion in the West. However, Anglo-French planning was now predicated on the assumption that in the longer run the Western powers, by fully mobilising their resources backed by the economic resources of the United States, and by the use of economic blockade, would be able to defeat Germany; and for this assumption Liddell Hart saw no justification. He agreed that the Allies’ formula of “economic and moral pressure” for the first stage of the war was their only practical
strategy, but maintained that they were unlikely to assemble superior strength to defeat Germany in any time-range. He argued that as Germany now dominated eastern Europe, the effect of the blockade might prove limited, especially if the Soviet Union were to supply Germany with the raw materials she needed. Relying on the experience of both world wars, he was undoubtedly right.

So what did Liddell Hart suggest the Allies should do? Having lost their ability to contain Germany within her old frontiers, choke her economically if she attempted to break out of them, and indeed win a war against her, the Allies’ only desirable option, as Liddell Hart saw it, was, in effect, armed coexistence alongside her. Central and south-east Europe could not be rescued from German domination, at least until Germany fell out with the Soviet Union. What the Western Allies ought to concentrate upon in terms of grand strategy was the security of the Western bloc or Western civilisation. Until a satisfactory peace with Germany could be negotiated, there should be no more than a continuation of the “Twilight” or “Phoney War”—“Sitzkrieg”—which was already prevailing on the Western Front. From this perspective, that mode of war was not a laughable abnormality, as it is widely viewed, indicative of the weakness of Western resolve. Instead, it was the Allies’ most natural strategy. It was not far from the strategic policy that the Western Allies would adopt against the Soviet Union after the Second World War. In all but name, this was a policy and strategy of containment and cold war prior to the advent of nuclear weapons. It was hoped that over time, as the Western alliance formed its defences and deployed its resources, the Germans would be forced to seek an accommodation with the West. It was also hoped that the Nazi regime might mellow or lose power. As Chamberlain wrote to Roosevelt (and to his sisters), Britain would not win the war “by a spectacular and complete victory, but by convincing the Germans that they cannot win .... Hold out tight, keep up the economic pressure, push on with munition production and military preparations with the utmost energy” but “take no offensive unless Hitler’s begins it”.

To that end, no provocative offensive action was to be attempted by the West, for no promising course of action could be envisaged anyhow and any Western offensive initiative would only drive Germany into action and lead to escalation. Liddell Hart was more insistent and consistent about this than the Allies’ political and military authorities. As the French and British high commands were agreed, the Allies would not be able to carry out a land offensive in the west for years to come. The bombing of the Ruhr and of German cities was clearly not in the Allies’ interest, for they,
and especially France, were more vulnerable than Germany to such attacks and because the Luftwaffe held the advantage in the air. When in the winter of 1939–40 the idea of Anglo-French expeditions to Scandinavia captured the imagination of Allied public opinion, Liddell Hart rejected it outright. There was much enthusiasm for armed intervention in defence of the heroic Finns against the Soviet Union, and Hore-Belisha, for example, the former minister of war, was not untypical in talking about the prospects of occupying Leningrad and smashing the Soviet Union, as an indirect move against Germany. Liddell Hart, however, saw very clearly that the Red Army’s initial defeats created a false impression as to its real strength, and that in the end it was bound to conquer. He argued that the Soviet Union’s demand for the removal of its border with Finland from the gates of Leningrad was strategically understandable and that its offer of a territorial exchange with Finland was reasonable. Finally, and most importantly, he stressed that to add the Soviet Union to the West’s enemies and push it further into Germany’s arms was total madness. For all that, an Allied expedition to Finland was seriously considered, especially by the French, and widely publicised by the press. Only the collapse of Finnish resistance put an end to these schemes.

The expedition to Finland was largely conceived as an excuse for cutting off the transport of the Swedish iron ores destined for Germany via neutral Norwegian waters. Again, Liddell Hart totally opposed this idea, which had been championed in Cabinet by Churchill since the beginning of the war. Critics have remarked that in this he appears to have gone against his own major doctrines of the indirect approach and the British way in warfare. However, apart from the fact that Liddell Hart never claimed that any indirect operation was necessarily good, the point is that he viewed the proposed Norwegian operation as undesirable in terms of the overall grand strategy he advocated, as well as being, specifically, unsound. The Swedish ores were sufficiently important for Germany to provoke her into action, whereas the Allies were not strong enough to prevent her from overrunning Norway. When the alarmed Germans responded to the Royal Navy’s action in Norwegian waters by a pre-emptive invasion of Denmark and Norway, Liddell Hart, while urging that speed was now the most essential requirement of the Allies’ response, regarded the ensuing events as a deserved punishment for a reckless folly.

It is interesting to see how the Allies’ attitudes were echoed on the other side of the hill. After the Polish campaign the German high command, led by Brauchitsch and Halder supported by all three army group commanders, was almost unanimously against launching any offensive in the west.
Most high-ranking German generals did not believe Germany was capable of decisively defeating the Allies, and feared that such an offensive would develop into a high-intensity war of attrition that could only be to Germany’s disadvantage. They thought that Germany ought to sit quietly and concentrate on absorbing the wealth of eastern Europe. In the words of General Alfred Jodl: “There was, particularly in the army, a widespread opinion that the war would die a natural death if we only kept quiet in the West.” It was Hitler who forced the reluctant army into planning and executing an offensive in the west. To the surprise of the generals on both sides, the whole Allied strategy of containment collapsed in May–June 1940, when the Germans succeeded in decisively defeating the Allies and overran continental western Europe.

I now move to the third and last phase of the period covered in this chapter—when Britain stood alone. Churchill’s crucial decision, by which he stamped his mark on history, was to keep Britain in the war after the fall of France and to continue the fight with total commitment of all resources until Nazi Germany was overthrown and “victory” achieved. In the defence establishment this “act of faith” was expressed in the more systematic language of strategic planning. From the spring of 1940 an overall strategy was devised by which it was believed that Britain would not only survive but defeat Germany. This strategy guided Britain’s war effort so long as she remained alone in the war. In hindsight historians agree that it was based on unsustainable and naively optimistic assumptions which had no prospect of materialising. Liddell Hart, however, assessed all that at the time. He had no quarrel with Churchill’s decision to continue the war, maintain Britain’s independence, and resist Germany’s domination of continental Europe. He, too, believed deeply that Britain had to be the core around which Western civilisation would be rebuilt. However, on the other hand he assessed that Britain had no chance of defeating Germany militarily.

Devised by the chiefs of staff in May 1940 to take account of the expected fall of France and reaffirmed in September at the height of the Battle of Britain, British strategy held that Britain would never be able to create a land force strong enough to invade the Continent and defeat the German army. It was assumed, however, that German power could be weakened by the application of combined pressures which ultimately, and relatively quickly, might lead to its collapse. The effort was to consist of three principal means: the blockade, strategic bombing and subversion in the occupied countries—leading to armed insurrections against the Germans, supported by small amphibious British expeditionary forces. This strategic conception was, of course, the “maritime”, “indirect”, “British Way in
Warfare” which Liddell Hart had espoused in his earlier theoretical writings. And yet he now maintained that this strategy would never be able to bring down a great power like Germany which ruled most of the Continent.

Despite Germany’s occupation of western Europe, domination over central and south-eastern Europe, and economic access to the Soviet Union—all of which were recognised by the British chiefs of staff—the latter nonetheless expressed their belief that Germany was critically dependent on raw materials, food, and especially oil from overseas. The chiefs of staff thus maintained that a British blockade would bring Germany’s war economy to a halt within several months and create widespread famine. It was widely believed that the foundations of the Nazi regime were shaky, that morale on the German home front was very low, and that both might collapse at any moment. It seems incredible today that professional opinion could subscribe to such wishful thinking. But it universally did. Liddell Hart, however, had assessed after Munich, and especially after the signing of the Soviet-German pact in August 1939, that the economic blockade could no longer be regarded as a decisive weapon.

The authors of British strategy evaluated the efficacy of the blockade in conjunction with the effects of a strategic bombing campaign, targeted at the German war economy. Although highly charged, the facts about how city bombing began and escalated during the Second World War are little disputed among historians. By an order issued on 1 April 1940, Hitler specifically instructed that the air war in the coming campaign should not be allowed to escalate into city bombing. He cannot, of course, be suspected of any humanitarian scruples. But against opponents who were able to retaliate, he was very sensitive to the safety of the German civilian rear. During the Battle of Britain the Luftwaffe was under strict orders not to bomb civilian targets. On 24 August, however, residential areas in London were bombed by mistake, and the next night the RAF retaliated by bombing Berlin. This was a major cause of the German decision to begin raids on London on 7 September. These attacks were still aimed at strategic targets in the capital. Hitler rejected requests from the Luftwaffe to bomb residential areas, which he wanted to reserve as a last resort to deter the British from bombing German cities. On 19 September Bomber Command was ordered to start a full-scale bombing offensive against Germany. Once the Germans, like the British before them, were forced to switch to night bombing, any discrimination between civilian and strategic targets became almost impossible, even if the belligerents so desired, which they increasingly did not.
Liddell Hart viewed these developments with alarm and despair. As early as January 1941 he assessed that a bombing match between England and Germany was unlikely to be decisive, and that its only result would be vast, indiscriminate devastation and exhaustion. More significantly, he argued that in a bombing match between Germany and Britain, Germany, possessing air bases in France and the Low Countries, in close proximity to Britain, was bound to inflict on her much heavier punishment. It was a contest under wholly unequal terms, as the bombing campaign during the winter of 1941 demonstrated. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was to distract the Luftwaffe from Britain for the rest of the war; but the attack on the Soviet Union was not known when the British bomber offensive was launched, could have failed to take place, or might have ended differently. Under the circumstances prevailing at the time, Liddell Hart maintained that initiating or escalating a bombing campaign against Germany’s civilian rear was a wholly irrational strategy for Britain. He believed that Churchill’s combative nature was pushing him again into a disastrous venture whose prospects for success and probable outcome had not been fully thought out.

Britain’s third strategy for the defeat of Germany after the fall of France was subversion, backed by amphibious sallies and landings. Here too, however, Liddell Hart saw no prospect for success. In November 1940 he poured cold water on Hore-Belisha’s enthusiasm, writing to him that he had checked and found out that the overwhelming majority of amphibious operations carried out in the previous three centuries had been failures. While he agreed that action against Italy—especially in Africa—was the most promising strategy for Britain, he wrote that if Italy were ever to be brought to the point of collapse, German troops would overrun her with ease. British expeditionary forces would stand no chance against the German army, and landing attempts would only lead to new Dunkirks.

The Greek campaign was a case in point. Churchill sought to consolidate a Balkan front against the Axis from the beginning of the war. However, the British military authorities claimed that Britain had no forces to spare and that whatever she sent would be swept away by the Germans. The Italian invasion of Greece raised the question again. The Greeks succeeded in defeating the invaders and pursued them into Albania. The British then began to toy with the idea of gaining a foothold on the Continent, especially air bases from which the Romanian oilfields could be attacked. This, however, was precisely the sort of British involvement the Greeks did not want. They sought to avoid, not provoke, a German invasion. Indeed, Hitler, who decided at the end of 1940 to attack
the Soviet Union rather than pursue a Mediterranean strategy, was anxious to avoid any distractions. However, alarmed by the British activity and the potential threat to the Romanian oilfields, he felt that an invasion of Greece might become unavoidable.

In view of the German army's concentrations in Romania and entry into Bulgaria, and following the Italian defeat in Libya, Churchill renewed his pressure to have British forces sent to Greece. The resumption of the offensive in North Africa was postponed, and British forces began to disembark in Piraeus at the beginning of March. By that time Hitler had decided that the occupation of Greece had indeed become unavoidable. As Yugoslavia was coerced into joining the tripartite pact (but not to allow Axis troops through her territory), a pro-British coup took place in Belgrade. It led to a swift German invasion which occupied both Yugoslavia and Greece in less than a month. British prestige again suffered a severe blow, as the British expeditionary force had to be evacuated, leaving most of its equipment and 11,000 men behind. A month later the humiliation was completed with the fall of Crete. Whereas after the war it was believed that the Balkan campaign may have delayed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union and thus contributed to its failure, later studies have shown that its effect was almost negligible. Liddell Hart, for his part, maintained that British decision-makers continued to ignore realities and that Churchill had dragged one small neutral after another into the war and Nazi occupation by means of foolish provocations.

So what did Liddell Hart propose instead? The only viable strategy he saw for Britain was cold war. Britain was unable to liberate occupied Europe by force. Therefore, while making her defences impregnable, she must renounce all offensive efforts. She should try to return to normality and in collaboration with the United States resume economic growth and foster prosperity. Her best weapon would be the building up of a free and just society at home which would serve as a shining model and as an attractive alternative to the German "New Order" in Europe. This model would be constantly subversive to German rule, until in time it might lead to its disintegration from within.

Such ideas would gain universal currency after World War II, with the Cold War. In retrospect they appear extremely interesting and intriguing. Whether or not they could be realistically applied against Germany and before the nuclear age is not our concern here. More relevant is the question of whether Liddell Hart was not unduly pessimistic regarding the prospects of victory, because Churchill's strategy was ultimately based on the assumption that the United States would join the war, tip the scales
against Germany, and make possible her defeat. As this conference’s organisers wisely proposed, we should all seek to avoid judging the “events within the constraining knowledge of the events that followed from the summer of 1941 onwards”. So let us proceed on this advice.

Churchill believed that the United States would enter the war before long, probably after the presidential elections in November 1940. This did not happen. Massive American economic aid in the form of Land-Lease enabled Britain to continue the fight. But the prospect of an American declaration of war remained a dubious matter throughout 1941. During the summer of that year the United States extended Land-Lease to the Soviet Union, took over the battle against the German submarines in the western half of the Atlantic, and garrisoned Iceland. In August Roosevelt and Churchill signed the declarative Atlantic Charter. Nevertheless, it remained clear to the British that American entry into the war was not to be expected in the near future. The majority of Americans and of members of Congress objected to the war, and Roosevelt’s own intentions were unclear. He was surely not going to allow Britain to fall and probably would have used the United States’ growing weight to steadily increase American influence on the course of the war. But was he waiting for more progress to be made on the United States’ rearmament and was he using the time to prepare American public opinion for its eventual participation in the war? Or was he quite satisfied with the existing situation in which Britain and the Soviet Union were doing the fighting with massive American political and economic support but without full American participation? These questions remain in dispute and can probably never be decided. It is doubtful whether Roosevelt himself knew. It was only Japan’s surprise attack and the subsequent German declaration of war on the United States that finally decided the issue, as the German invasion of the Soviet Union had done for the USSR. Both of Britain’s mighty allies in the coalition against Germany entered the war against their will.

Indeed, highly significant for our subject is the fact that something similar to the democracies’ strategy of containment and cold war in Europe was also applied by the United States in the Pacific. Although far more powerful than Japan in all respects, the US deployed non-military means to contain her in 1940–41. She tightened the screw of economic sanctions so strongly that her imposition of an oil embargo threatened to bring Japan to her knees. Unfortunately, defensive precautions to back up this policy proved insufficient. As with Germany the year before, the policy of containment, economic coercion and cold war floundered when the enemy did the unthinkable and, in a highly successful lightning campaign, broke down the walls which had been built up against him.
Whether Hitler’s ultimate aims and the pressures of the war and of the
war economy would anyhow have driven Germany into war with both the
Soviet Union and the United States is difficult to tell. History is not preor-
dained. It should be noted, however, that in the same way as Soviet partici-
pation did not necessarily mean victory over Germany until the United
States joined in, American participation still left the path to victory very
unclear had not the Soviet Union been brought into the war and survived
to engage the lion’s share of the German land forces. The participation of
both powers in the war was necessary. Only the development of the atomic
bomb can be cited as a sure means to victory for the West in the absence
of Soviet participation. As one historian has written: “Churchill won his
great war and thus his great victory, but some alternative line would have
to have been devised in the absence of the Russian and American alli-
ances, or in the event of the rapid defeat of Russia in 1941 and continued
benevolent neutrality of the United States.”