

 **Review ESSAY**

Ian Kershaw. *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941.* London and New York: Penguin, 2007. pp. xxiv, 624. ISBN 978-0-713-99712-5.

Review by **Gerhard L. Weinberg**, University of North Carolina, Emeritus
Published by H-Diplo on 4 November 2007

The author of a recent excellent two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler has selected ten decisions made in the early stages of World War II for careful examination. One might argue about the choices selected, but even if one could argue for a different selection, a reviewer ought to deal with the book the author wrote, not one he might have written. In each of the cases Kershaw carefully examines and recounts the background to the decision, explains the options – if any – as seen by the decider, points to the presence or absence of dissenting voices at the time, and delineates how and why the decision actually taken came to be.

The first decision examined is that of the British government in May-June 1940 to continue to fight against Germany after the fall of France. While this reviewer's reading of the evidence does not make the division between the views of Winston Churchill and Lord Halifax as clear cut as Kershaw does, no one is likely to disagree with the judgement that this decision was of enormous significance for the subsequent course of the war. Perhaps the account would have been more accurate if Kershaw had noted that in 1938 Churchill had privately informed the government of Czechoslovakia that if he were in power, he would follow the same policy as Neville Chamberlain, a policy he publicly attacked in his subsequent writings. And if Kershaw had noted that the fighter planes that won the Battle of Britain were not purchased at the 5 & 10 the day after Churchill became prime minister but had been ordered by Chamberlain over the opposition of the Labour Party, his account of the latter siding with Churchill in the decision to continue fighting would be easier to understand.

The second decision is that of Hitler taken in the summer of 1940 to attack the Soviet Union. Unfortunately in recounting the circumstances leading up to and surrounding this decision Kershaw has missed both the fact that German army chief of staff General Franz Halder was making plans for such an attack already on June 3, 1940, on the one hand, and the implications of the decision not to attack in the fall of 1940 but in 1941 instead for the immediately following German military moves into Finland and Romania as prospective allies. This decision, over-determined in a way by Hitler's ambitious plans of conquest, is again one whose significance for the course of the war as a whole will not be challenged by anyone.

The third decision engaged is that made in Tokyo in the summer and autumn of 1940 to move toward the seizure of vast additional areas in South and Southeast Asia as the colonial masters of the region were either crushed or threatened by Germany. In his

description of the decision making process in Japan, and especially in his analysis of the personality and fateful role of Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, the author is exceptionally thoughtful and convincing.

The fourth decision is that of Benito Mussolini to enter the war and to invade Greece. The way in which the Italian dictator had achieved his strong position but was not as unlimited in his authority as Hitler is carefully traced. Kershaw shows how poorly the attack on Greece was prepared, though this should perhaps be seen as a facet of Mussolini's general failure to prepare the country for the reality of war at a time when he was endlessly hailing in public the virtues of war as the path to Italy's greatness.

The fifth decision and the seventh are those of President Roosevelt in the summer of 1940 and his adherence to the decision in the following months to assist Great Britain to the extent that an essentially unarmed United States could do so. In this account, Kershaw provides a helpful analysis of the significance of public opinion, Congressional attitudes and conflicts, and internal differences within the administration. Unfortunately he is not aware of the work of Jürgen Rohwer, the distinguished German historian of signal intelligence and the Battle of the Atlantic, who showed twenty-five years ago that the decrypts of radio signals between the German naval command and their submarines were systematically utilized to route ships and convoys around the submarine lines. The very information that could have been used to make certain that there was an incident almost every day was instead utilized for the exactly opposite purpose. In his ignoring of this significant finding, and its reflection in this reviewer's writings, Kershaw is not alone. Practically all American diplomatic historians have made the same mistake in the last two decades. On the other hand, in his recounting of the decisions made by Roosevelt, Kershaw pays appropriate attention to the president's personal role in the three critical facets of the process by which the United States inched closer to the conflict: the destroyer for bases deal, the concept and popularization of lend-lease, and the beginnings of convoys for ships carrying cargo across the Atlantic.

The sixth decision is that of Josef Stalin that he knew best in the face of intelligence pointing to a German invasion. In stressing the Soviet dictator's alleged expectation of a possible German invasion in 1942 – and after the Germans had raised demands he would not meet – Kershaw misses several critical points. Whatever one thinks of his 1939 negotiations with the Western Powers in public while negotiating with the Germans secretly, there is no way to avoid a comparison of Stalin's conduct with first his German and then his British and American allies. The Germans could have a naval base on Soviet territory and all sorts of other assistance to sink as many Allied ships as possible, but there was never an analogous enthusiasm for aiding the Western Allies. Liberated German POW's of the Poles were returned to Germany in exemplary fashion; nothing similar would be the experience of British and American POWs liberated in 1944-45, etc. etc. First Soviet military intelligence and subsequently the American government provided Stalin with a copy of the German invasion order, but Stalin dismissed all such intelligence. Kershaw remains convinced that Stalin might have preferred an alliance with the West in 1939 but never considers the third possible choice for the Soviet Union: real neutrality rather than supplying the German war machine. Does not the 1939 choice of an alignment with Germany instead of either with

the West or of real neutrality have something to do with his insistence that German reconnaissance planes flying deep into the skies over the Soviet Union in 1940-1 under no circumstances be interfered with?

The eighth decision is that for war in Tokyo. In exemplary fashion, Kershaw shows how the complicated mechanism of policy formulation and decision making in Tokyo worked. He shows how the military pushed the country forward within a framework of prior choices for massive expansion beyond the war with China and even at the acknowledged risk of national disaster. Here it would have been useful to emphasize the critical step of moving Japanese troops into southern French Indo-China. The move into northern Indo-China could be seen as connected with the war against China because it cut off the railway across which Nationalist China could receive supplies. The move into southern Indo-China clearly pointed away from the war with China toward war with the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands. It was seen that way both in Tokyo – with the expectation that an oil embargo would follow – and in Washington. That the United States did not want to follow the Soviet example of providing essential supplies until the moment of an attack is hardly surprising. It is related to a final proposal that Tokyo rejected: if the Japanese would evacuate southern Indo-China, the United States would sell them all the oil they wanted. Sadly, the preference in Tokyo was for war.

The ninth decision is that of Hitler to declare war on the United States. This is unfortunately the weakest of the ten chapters since Kershaw completely neglects Hitler's 1937 decision to prepare for war with the United States by ordering the development of an inter-continental bomber (the ME 264) and the designing of super-battleships to deal with the American navy. Unable to complete these ships, of which the first were laid down early in 1939, Hitler held back the German navy that urged war with the United States beginning in October, 1939. Once the Japanese provided the navy, there was no need to wait. Hitler ordered war with the US and a string of other countries in the Western Hemisphere as soon as he heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor – why wait until he could get to Berlin to go through the formalities? In his account of Hitler's decision, Kershaw stresses the broader issues as Hitler saw them but assumes that these grew out of the current situation rather than being in line with long held views and assumptions.

The tenth decision is again one by Hitler. This is his decision to kill the Jews systematically. Kershaw traces Hitler's obsession with the Jewish "problem" as he imagined it. There is also a helpful account of the various steps taken in the early years of Nazi rule and the first part of World War II. In the transition to mass killing in the summer of 1941, the early involvement of the police battalions revealed by the declassification of the British intercepts of their reports on it in 1996 is missing. Kershaw differentiates the nature of the decision in this instance from the others; a point on which most readers will agree with him. The further differentiation from other genocides is, however, not noted, namely that this one was not geographically limited but was to extend to the whole globe as Hitler himself explained at length to the Mufti of Jerusalem in November 1941 and extended outside Europe when the opportunity arose.

In a concluding chapter of reflections, the author reviews the decisions he has traced and shows how they were related to and affected by the governmental and cultural structures within which they arose. All ten enormously affected the course of the greatest war of which we know and certainly deserve the thoughtful probing that this book gives them.

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse