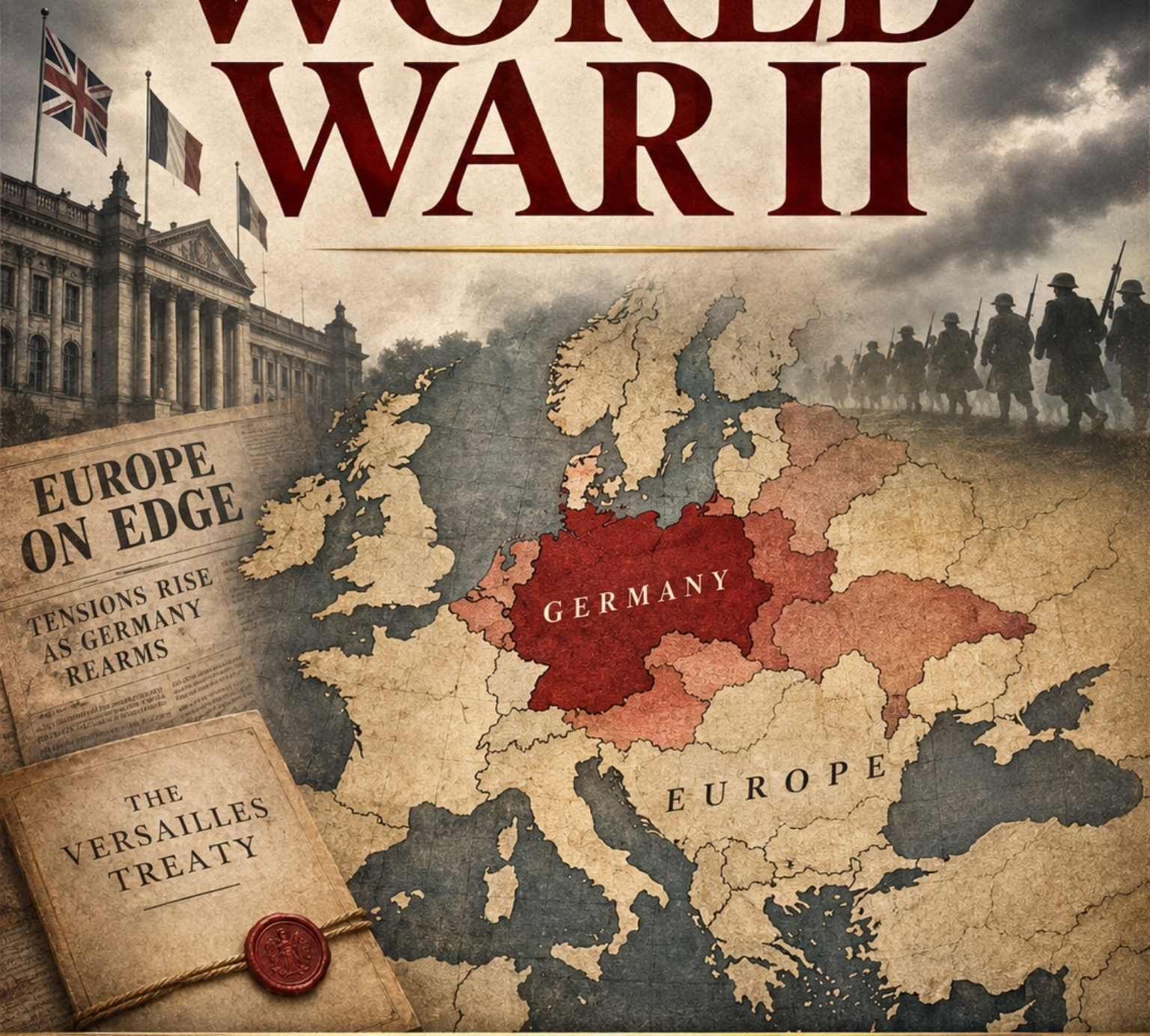
WORLD WAR II COLLECTION

BOOK 1

THE ROAD TO WORLD WAR II



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WORLD WAR II COLLECTION / VOLUME ONE

THE ROAD TO WORLD WAR II

The political, economic, and military crises that led to global war

ARTHUR HARGREAVES

Forty chapters | 1894–1941 | Large-print reading edition

PREFACE

Why did the world go to war again? It is tempting to offer a single answer: Versailles, the Depression, Hitler, or the failure of appeasement. Each mattered. None, taken alone, adequately explains the disaster. The Second World War emerged from decisions taken in different capitals over many years, by institutions that failed, by armed expansion in Asia well before September 1939, and by political systems whose leaders came to regard war as an instrument of national rebirth. It began as separate crises and became a conflict spanning continents and oceans.

This book follows that convergence. The first chapters explain the imperial order before 1914 and the catastrophe that shattered it. We then examine the peace settlement, the collapse of democracies, economic depression, the rise of fascism and Nazism, Soviet transformation, and Japan's prolonged invasion of China. The closing chapters trace the decisions of 1938–1941, when warning after warning ceased to produce effective restraint. The result was not the fulfillment of an impersonal destiny. Decisions made by particular people, under particular pressures, repeatedly narrowed the range of peaceful choices.

The approach is deliberately international. The war cannot be understood solely from Berlin, London, Washington, or Moscow. Chinese armies had been resisting Japanese expansion for years

before Americans fought at Pearl Harbor. African and Asian colonies provided troops, raw materials, bases, and labour. Neutral governments watched their room for manoeuvre shrink. Families, farmers, factory workers, and refugees experienced the approach of war long before most politicians admitted what was coming.

The book is intended for readers who enjoy military and political history but want more than lists of dates and commanders. When interpretations remain contested, the text distinguishes evidence from judgment. A conflict involving persecution, mass violence, and state terror cannot be told accurately by treating those subjects as unfortunate footnotes to grand strategy. Nor should the men and women of 1939 be judged as though they possessed the knowledge we have gained since. The historian's duty is to explain what they could know, what they chose to believe, and what they did.

The historical maps and original photographs planned for an expanded illustrated edition are not included here. This text-only edition uses the approved cover as its sole image. The forty chapters follow the agreed prewar historical structure and end in December 1941, where the next volumes take up the campaigns in detail.

PART I

THE WORLD THAT CREATED THE FIRST WORLD WAR

CHAPTER 1

THE WORLD BEFORE THE CATASTROPHE

At the opening of the twentieth century, a traveller crossing Europe could pass between empires whose frontiers contained a bewildering variety of peoples. The Habsburg emperor governed Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Croats, and others. The Russian tsar ruled territory stretching toward the Pacific. The British Empire connected London to India, much of Africa, strategic ports, and shipping routes around the globe. France possessed a large overseas empire; Germany, unified only in 1871, demanded international respect corresponding to its growing industrial strength. The Ottoman Empire still held important territories, although its influence had contracted. Beneath the appearance of established authority lay demands for national independence and conflicting claims to land.

Imperial competition was not simply a matter of prestige. Commercial access, naval bases, coaling stations, colonial taxes, and raw materials were considered instruments of security. Britain's fleet protected trade and empire; German naval construction threatened to narrow that advantage. France

remembered the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871. Russia's rulers watched developments in the Balkans, where Slavic nationalism and the weakening Ottoman order created opportunities and dangers. Austria-Hungary feared that demands for national self-determination might destabilize its multinational state. These interests did not always make war inevitable, but they gave each crisis a wider significance.

Two alliance systems appeared to offer reassurance. Germany and Austria-Hungary stood at the center of the Triple Alliance with Italy, though Italian commitments would prove uncertain. France and Russia were linked by alliance, while Britain's understandings with France and Russia formed the Triple Entente. Treaties were not automatic machines that compelled their signatories to fire. Governments still possessed choices. Yet mobilization timetables, staff plans, and fear of strategic disadvantage encouraged leaders to see delay as dangerous. Soldiers and diplomats often spoke different political languages: one measured railway schedules and divisions; the other sought room for negotiation.

Outside Europe, the international order was changing. The United States had become an industrial giant and a consequential Pacific power. Japan's victory over China in 1895 and over Russia in 1905 had transformed its standing and established its own empire in Korea and Taiwan. China struggled with foreign concessions, internal disorder, and demands for reform. The colonies of European powers were not passive backgrounds: their

labour and resources sustained imperial economies, and their soldiers would later fight on foreign battlefields. The existing order was global, unequal, and increasingly contested.

This is the first essential point in understanding the next world war. It did not arise from a peaceful world suddenly interrupted by a single dictator. It emerged from a century in which industrial states had developed immense military and administrative capacity without devising dependable ways to settle fundamental disputes. In 1914 those capacities would be used on an unprecedented scale. The survivors would have to design a new order from the ruins—one that, within a generation, would be challenged again.

The balance that seemed permanent

A visitor moving through the capitals of Europe in the years before 1914 would have encountered a civilization convinced of its strength. Railways joined industrial cities, ocean liners crossed the Atlantic on reliable schedules, and the telegraph reduced the time necessary to transmit a diplomatic instruction from days to minutes. Yet technological connection did not produce political trust. Governments knew more about one another's movements than their predecessors had known, but information could be interpreted as a warning rather than reassurance. When one navy ordered new battleships, its competitor could point to those ships as proof that its own program was indispensable. A treaty written to deter aggression might be read in another capital as evidence of encirclement.

Britain's empire gave London a global view of security. The approaches to the English Channel mattered, but so did the Suez Canal, the routes to India, the Persian Gulf, and the ports through which food and raw materials reached British cities. Germany, rapidly industrializing after unification in 1871, possessed scientific universities and an army of formidable reputation, yet its leaders believed their political influence was not equal to their economic position. Kaiser Wilhelm II's search for a more assertive world role sharpened old anxieties in Paris and new ones in London. The German naval program was expensive and symbolically

important, even though it could not easily overturn Britain's geographic advantages and maritime experience.

France viewed Germany through the memory of 1870–1871, when defeat cost it Alsace-Lorraine. Russian leaders worried about the Balkans and access to warm-water routes while confronting a long frontier and internal social pressure. Austria-Hungary feared that the language of national self-determination would pull apart the state itself. Serbia, strengthened by Balkan conflicts, wanted a larger political role among South Slavs. The Ottoman Empire, declining in European influence but still sovereign across substantial territories, tried to protect what remained. These were not identical fears, and one should resist treating the governments as identical actors. Some sought territory; others security, prestige, commercial access, or simply the survival of institutions assembled over generations.

An age of empire beyond Europe

The politics of imperial rivalry could not be understood exclusively from a European map. African territories supplied labor, taxes, crops, minerals, strategic harbors, and routes of communication. British rule in India drew the subcontinent into European wars through soldiers, revenues, and commercial networks. French North and West Africa had their own military and administrative significance. The German empire held colonies in Africa and the Pacific, while the Japanese government increasingly thought of Korea, Manchuria, and the Western Pacific as the natural grounds of its great-power ambitions. People living under imperial rule did not necessarily share the interests of the capitals claiming authority over them. Resistance, accommodation, reform movements, and demands for independence were all present before the First World War.

The United States occupied an unusual position. Its productive capacity and growing navy made it difficult for other powers to ignore; its domestic politics nevertheless contained a powerful preference for avoiding permanent European commitments. American investments and trade tied it closely to international markets. Presidents and legislators also pursued influence in the Caribbean and Pacific, where strategic assumptions were no less consequential because they were described differently from European colonial policy. By 1914 power was becoming more

widely distributed, but the diplomatic vocabulary of the leading states had not adjusted to this wider world.

Why a single incident could become a continental war

General staffs prepared for danger by writing mobilization schedules. Their plans reflected rail capacity, concentration times, and fears that a delayed deployment could leave the country permanently behind. The same planning created a trap: once leaders believed the opponent was moving, restraint could appear militarily reckless. The German army's principal contingency required a rapid offensive in the west before the full Russian force could concentrate in the east. French leaders planned for operations against Germany; Russian plans had to consider two enemies; Austria-Hungary had to divide attention between Serbia and Russia. None of these documents mechanically caused war, but their assumptions narrowed choices during a crisis.

It is inaccurate to imagine that every European government actively wanted a world war. Important decision makers hoped to obtain a diplomatic victory without the risks of prolonged combat, while others accepted a military confrontation they expected to remain limited. The danger was the gap between what each government believed it could control and what its choices made possible. The alliances did not operate as perfectly automatic machines; governments debated their obligations and options. But the threat of losing credibility with allies made the temptation to retreat weaker. To understand 1914—and

ultimately 1939—we must see military plans, national fears, and political decisions as parts of the same problem. Modern societies had become highly capable of preparing for war without developing institutions equally capable of stopping its escalation.

The geographical trap of the European balance

The expression balance of power can sound abstract until it is translated into geography. Britain, protected by the Channel and the North Sea, possessed a navy suited to defending maritime commerce and restricting an opponent's imports. France faced Germany across a land frontier, and feared a rapid invasion even during periods of diplomatic calm. Germany lay between France and Russia. That position made German leaders intensely sensitive to the prospect of war on two fronts, but it also encouraged planning for a quick offensive against one opponent before the other was fully mobilized. Austria-Hungary was a sprawling, vulnerable partnership of political institutions and national groups. Russia's size promised resources but also imposed formidable difficulties of transport and coordination. None of these facts made any particular declaration of war compulsory; they shaped the fears with which leaders approached a crisis.

The maps most familiar today can obscure another reality. In 1914 the borders of several states enclosed populations with different languages, confessions, political loyalties and historical memories. Some groups sought political rights within the empire; others imagined independence or union with neighbors. A government

that conceded demands to one nationality sometimes worried that others would follow. It was therefore possible for a dispute over local administration, a contested railway, or a provincial assassination to become a question about the survival of a whole state. That fear was especially powerful in Vienna, where Serbian nationalism appeared not merely an irritation but a potential threat to the Habsburg monarchy's structure.

Technology made the danger sharper. Railways allowed armies to concentrate faster than in earlier centuries, yet rigid timetables could make partial measures difficult. Telegraphs brought urgent reports and demanded equally urgent replies. Newspapers turned diplomatic incidents into public tests of national pride. Military staffs generally prepared plans under assumptions about what an enemy would do; cabinet ministers then inherited those assumptions without necessarily understanding their limitations. The resulting system contained both deterrents and accelerants. A strong alliance could discourage attack, but an alliance whose members feared abandonment could also intensify an existing quarrel.

To understand what followed, the reader should therefore avoid two opposite simplifications. Europe was not a machine destined to explode in the summer of 1914. Nor was its catastrophe a freak accident unrelated to deeper tensions. The structures of empire, competitive armament, fear of encirclement, and unresolved national claims made a major war possible. Diplomats and rulers

then took decisions that made the possible real. The distinction between structural pressure and personal responsibility will recur throughout the origins of the Second World War.

The Pacific and the colonial world in the great-power system

Political maps of the world around 1900 can deceive the reader into thinking that the conflicts of the next four decades began only in Europe. The map showed large areas under European colonial control, but administration and authority varied enormously. Some territories were ruled directly by governors appointed overseas; others retained local rulers with constrained sovereignty; still others were linked by protectorate agreements, commercial privileges or military bases. These arrangements affected ports, customs revenue, railway construction and the movement of labor. They also defined which governments could declare war, negotiate treaties or decide how colonial forces would be used.

The route from the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean was strategically central to Britain. The Royal Navy depended on bases, fuel and repair facilities around the globe. France's possessions in North and West Africa connected European strategy to African manpower and resources. Germany's colonies offered prestige and possible commercial opportunities, but they were scattered and vulnerable to maritime attack. A conflict between European states could therefore produce fighting across oceans almost immediately, because

overseas empires were part of the belligerents' military and economic systems.

In East Asia, Japanese leaders had observed Western naval and industrial advantages and pursued an ambitious modernization program. Their victories against China and Russia transformed the regional balance. Korea's loss of sovereignty, foreign spheres of influence in China, and competition over railways and ports demonstrated that imperial politics could be especially intense outside Europe. The United States acquired overseas interests after its war with Spain in 1898 and developed a direct stake in the Pacific. American, Japanese, British, Dutch, French and other commercial interests were increasingly intertwined with questions of naval security.

For people living under colonial authority, the approaching twentieth-century wars could impose obligations without democratic participation in the governments that made those decisions. Troops might be recruited for service far from home; crops redirected toward military supply; taxes increased; or transport facilities requisitioned. Anti-imperial movements responded in different ways. Some leaders hoped wartime service would earn political concessions, while others argued that imperial claims of liberty were inconsistent with their own lack of independence. These contradictions shaped the international language of 1919 and the world into which the next war would come.