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ESSAY BY GERHARD L. WEINBERG, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA CHAPEL HILL, EMERITUS

Born in 1928 in Hannover, Germany, into a Jewish family, the new restrictions on Jews meant my being kicked out of the equivalent of the fifth grade in November 1938. The family had already applied for immigration into the United States, and we went to England to await the calling up of our “Quota Numbers” under the arrangement for such cases worked out by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in addition to the famous *Kindertransport*. Our numbers came up in the summer of 1940, and we left for the United States on September 1.¹

In a boarding school in England in 1939 I was so impressed by the instructors that at the age of eleven I decided that I wanted to become a teacher. When my family settled in Albany, New York, in December 1940, I was very pleased to learn that New York State College for Teachers (now the NY State University at Albany) was there, and I entered it in January 1944. My plan then was to become a secondary school teacher of social studies and Latin, but this changed when military service opened graduate work through the GI Bill and hence the possibility of college teaching. Several professors at Albany recommended the University of Chicago for graduate work in history, the part of social studies I was most interested in.

Within the broader field of history, I was especially interested in diplomatic history. The origins of World War I, in which my father and other relatives had served, especially intrigued me. Rather than add to the endless literature on the crisis of the summer of 1914, I wanted to work on the diplomacy of the 1870's and 1880's to see how the whole world had gotten itself involved in a war as a result of an assassination in a city most had never heard of. I wrote my first seminar paper on the Eastern Crisis of 1876. Very soon, however, I recognized that the professor under whom I would be working, Hans Rothfels, had views of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck that were the opposite of mine. Since I could not afford to change universities, I changed centuries and did my MA thesis and Ph.D. dissertation on German-Soviet relations 1939-41.

While working on that topic, I was doing a big project for the university's Law School. They had been given a huge collection of documents and other materials from the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials that was housed in numerous crates. I opened the crates and organized the documents and other records in them (all of which are now in the Center for Research Libraries). In this process, I was, of course, the first person to utilize many of them for my research. This meant developing a familiarity with German documents of the Nazi era. This in turn led to my first publication and my first academic position.

In the last years of the 1940's the State Department had begun to publish the German diplomatic documents. In a seminar for Rothfels I wrote a paper on the May 1938 crisis in German-Czech relations. In the process I discovered on the basis of my work for the Law Library that the editors of the relevant volume of German documents had made some errors in regard to the included military documents. Professor Rothfels recommended that I submit a critical note to the *Journal of Modern*

¹ For more information on this phase in my life, please see ‘Oral History Interview with Gerhard L. Weinberg,’ conducted by Astrid M. Eckert (Emory University) on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 2012, <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn74729>.

History. I did so, and the *Journal* published it in the March 1951 issue.² Dr. Fritz Epstein, who was recruiting scholars for a documents project had read this piece, interviewed me at Midway Airport between planes, and soon after offered me a position on the War Documentation Project (WDP), a Columbia University contract with the U.S. Air Force.

Right after finishing the Ph.D., I started on the WDP on September 1, 1951, and was in it for three years. Working in the collection of captured German records in Alexandria, Virginia, certainly extended my experience with the war and the realities often missing or distorted in German memoirs. In addition to preparing a guide to German records that had somehow gotten into other depositories that became one of my books,³ the work on the WDP led to the American Historical Association subsequently asking me to organize the microfilming of the German records in Alexandria before they were returned to Germany.

After, again with the help of Fritz Epstein, I had published a revised version of my Ph.D. dissertation,⁴ I decided to prepare a study of the origins of World War II. It seemed to me that there was then no careful analysis of this subject, and I proceeded to work on it. This meant working in the National Archives in Washington and returning to Europe and working in archives in Koblenz, Germany, and in London. Originally published in two volumes by the University of Chicago Press in 1970 and 1980, and republished by other publishers as it went out of print; it was eventually published in a combined volume in 2005.⁵ Only in 2012 did the British scholar Zara Steiner publish another comprehensive analysis of the origins of World War II.⁶

When I finished writing the second of the original two volumes and sent the text to the University of Chicago Press in 1978, I thought a lot about what should be my next project. I decided to try to write a comprehensive history of World War II for several reasons. On the one hand, I was quite dissatisfied with much of the then existing literature on the war for several reasons. First, too much of the literature dealt with the European or the Pacific portions of the war without adequate recognition of their interrelation. Second, too many authors relied far too much on the memoirs of German military leaders, which I knew from work in the records could in many respects not be trusted. Third, too many authors had not spent the necessary time in the archives, especially those that were declassified in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

On the other hand, I had worked on World War II subjects and in a number of archives in the United States, England, and Germany and already had some familiarity with at least a portion of the relevant literature. It looked like an enterprise worth trying. To begin this project, I applied for and received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I worked extensively in the records of the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, the German military archive in Freiburg, the Public Records Office in London, the President Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, and some additional archives. The project

² Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Critical Note on the Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945," *Journal of Modern History* 23 (1951): 38-41.

³ Weinberg, *Guide to Captured German Documents* (Montgomery: HRRI, 1952); "Supplement to the Guide to Captured German Documents" (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1959).

⁴ Weinberg, *Germany and the Soviet Union, 1939-1941* (Leyden: Brill, 1954); reprint with a new preface, 1972.

⁵ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe, 1933-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970; reprinted with a new preface: Amherst: Humanity Books, 1993). *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937-1939* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); reprint with a new preface: Amherst: Humanity Books, 1993; *Hitler's Foreign Policy: The Road to World War II, 1933-1939* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005).

⁶ Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

took fourteen years, from 1978 to 1992, and was assisted by a Guggenheim Fellowship, but the resulting book published by Cambridge has certainly attracted considerable attention and been translated into several languages.⁷

An issue that intrigued me as I was researching and writing the history of World War II was that of the war aims of World War II leaders. The bitter conflict between the French leader Charles de Gaulle and American President Harry Truman over the former's desire for some additions to the French colonial empire and a bit of land adjacent to France from Italy first drew my attention to this subject. France needed neither a few additional glaciers in the Alps nor more desert in Africa. This looked to me like a traditional view of warfare: the winner took territory from the loser, and led me to prepare a book on the aims of eight leaders in the war. Since the book growing out of this project was published in 2005,⁸ I have focused on a revised edition of the WW II book, preparing a short introduction to World War II for Oxford University Press,⁹ trying to keep up with the literature, and preparing and delivering lectures in this and other countries on Nazi Germany, World War II, and the Holocaust, subjects that continue to draw considerable interest.

I remain impressed by the extreme helpfulness of so many archivists in this country, Germany, and England. The opening of some of the Soviet archives has led to important new literature that I have found very useful. Recent greater restrictiveness in this regard is a real problem, especially as the paper of the prewar and wartime era is deteriorating so that even its custodians can no longer read it. This problem is in my judgement now accentuated by the unwillingness of those creating computerized records and digitizing records in all countries to face up to the limited time these will actually be accessible to scholars in the future. Technology changes, and digitized materials do not last long. Too little attention is in my opinion being paid to these problems; and when I refer to them in government advisory committees or public lectures, most prefer not to listen and in one case prohibited publication. When as elected Vice-President for Research of the American Historical Association I was asked to assist in raising funds for a conference at Syracuse University about the famous historian Leopold von Ranke and did so, I was asked to give a paper at that conference. In my paper, I addressed the foregoing issues. After the conference the embarrassed organizers informed me that Syracuse University Press would publish the papers given at the conference, but only if the Weinberg paper were omitted. I told them to go ahead, and that I would publish my paper in a volume of prior articles of mine that was in the process of being prepared by Cambridge University Press.¹⁰ Such attitudes and procedures will do nothing to preserve paper, delay technological change, or prevent the fading of digitized materials.

Gerhard L. Weinberg is a German-born American diplomatic and military historian noted for his publications on the history of World War II. Weinberg is the William Rand Kenan, Jr. Professor Emeritus of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He taught at the universities of Chicago, Kentucky, Michigan, and North Carolina, retiring in 1999. Weinberg has held numerous positions in professional organizations and has served on and chaired a number of U.S. government advisory committees. His books have earned him a number of prizes, fellowships, and two honorary doctoral degrees.

⁷ Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1994]).

⁸ Weinberg, *Visions of Victory: The Hopes of Eight World War II Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁹ Weinberg, *World War II: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ "The End of Ranke's History? Reflections on the Fate of History in the Twentieth Century," Appendix in Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 325-336.