The Triumph of the Dark is a landmark study of the period from Adolph Hitler's rise to power to the outbreak of the Second World War. Together with Zara Steiner's earlier study in the Oxford History of Modern Europe series, The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919-1933, it constitutes the definitive analysis of the interwar period, the standard against which all subsequent work will be evaluated. Indeed, the two volumes should be read together. Steiner makes a compelling argument that the road to war in 1939 cannot be fully explained without an understanding of the consequences of the First World War and of the period that followed.

The 1930s have been explored at length by historians. What distinguishes The Triumph of the Dark is not so much new documents that definitively settle old debates, or a path-breaking new interpretation, but instead a grand historical synthesis based on both archival sources and a comprehensive and unmatched coverage of secondary sources. One thing that breaks new ground is Steiner's treatment of all of the relevant minor powers, based on new archival sources that became available only after 1990. Other particularly important contributions include Steiner's analysis of the impact of the Sino-Japanese conflict, the Spanish Civil War, and divergent ideological and cultural perspectives on the escalating European conflict. It is the fusion of many separate pieces into an integrated narrative, however, that makes The Triumph of the Dark so distinctive.

I leave it to others to set The Triumph of the Dark in the context of the extensive historiography of the 1930s. I focus primarily on the implications of the book for theories of international conflict. In the last decade international relations scholars began to devote considerable attention to the 1930s, using the period as a laboratory for examining theories of balance of power, preventive war, appeasement, and domestic and ideological sources of conflict. I begin with Steiner's view of the constraining effects of the international system; turn to her analysis of the role of individuals, ideology, and domestic politics; and then analyze the implications of her work for the "buying time for rearmament" interpretation of appeasement and for rationalist theories of war. I will refer more to the international relations literature than to the historiography of the period, on the assumption that the former is less familiar than the latter to most readers of H-Diplo.

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Steiner places considerable weight on the constraining effects of the international system on the foreign policy behaviors of states. The basic structure of the European system, she argues in *The Lights that Failed* and summarizes in *The Triumph of the Dark*, was shaped by the Great War, the Versailles treaty, the 1920s, and particularly by new developments in the 'hinge years' (1929-1933). She argues strongly that the peace of Versailles did not cause the Second World War (1037). The political, economic, and diplomatic structure that had emerged by the end of the 1920s was relatively stable and "not inevitably doomed to collapse" (1043).

That structure was seriously weakened, however, by developments during the hinge years. First and foremost was the global economic depression, which had profound consequences for politics and diplomacy through its adverse effects on economic prosperity, international cooperation, and attempts to forge limitations on armaments. "Well before Hitler took power," Steiner argues, "the 'lights' of the previous years – reconstruction, internationalism, multilateralism, and disarmament—had dimmed and the dark undercurrents of explosive nationalism, authoritarian rule, autarchy and militarism had surfaced.... Pressures for collective action gave way to policies of self-defence, neutrality and isolation.... The balance of power shifted steadily away from the status quo nations in the directions of those who favored its destruction" (1043).

The lights had certainly dimmed, but they had not been extinguished. The system could have survived, Steiner argues, but "the demise of the Weimar Republic and the triumph of Hitler proved the motor force of destructive systemic change" (1043). This comment, and the analysis from which it springs, makes it clear that Steiner does not treat the international system as an autonomous shaper of national behavior, as neorealist international relations scholars do, but instead as a product of domestic as well as international factors. Steiner's conception of international stability comes closer to a liberal view that emphasizes the role of international and domestic institutions, patterns of economic relations, the rule of law, and liberal values, than to a realist perspective that emphasizes the overriding importance of the distribution of power and balancing strategies, though she certainly does not ignore the latter.

I interpret Steiner as arguing that the collapse of Weimar and the triumph of Hitler were necessary but not sufficient conditions for war, though she is not this explicit. For Steiner, as for many others, this was "Hitler's war." Although she does not define exactly what this means in causal terms, Steiner strongly implies that without Hitler the war would not have occurred. She argues that "Domestic pressures did not force Hitler to go to war" (1031), that Hitler had reached a position where "his decision was the only one of any importance" in Nazi Germany (823), and that "without Hitler there could have been no Nazi party" (12).

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She also suggests that only someone with Hitler's charisma and political skills could have overcome the resistance of the German generals and of many in the finance and foreign ministries, who believed that the rate of rearmament demanded by Hitler was economically unsustainable and that his timetable for military expansion was dangerous (579). Through these arguments Steiner basically challenges some of the leading alternatives to the argument that Hitler was a necessary condition for war. I think, however, that her argument would have been even stronger had she dealt more explicitly and systematically with the counterfactual of a Germany without Hitler in the 1930s.6

The triumph of Hitler was not a sufficient condition for war because there were numerous points at which the path to war could have been diverted. Steiner emphasizes "the contingent nature of much of Hitler's successes" (1051) and the many intriguing counterfactual possibilities that might have led to a different outcome. The operative word here is "might." Steiner is cautious in making counterfactual judgments – for example, about what Joseph Stalin might have done if Britain and France had taken a stronger stand at Munich, or what Hitler might have done had the Soviet Union joined the Anglo-French alliance in 1939. Steiner argues that French and especially British leaders fundamentally misjudged Hitler, and that they could have done more to head off this "unnecessary war" (as Winston Churchill called it). She recognizes, however, that such actions would have required an "enormous psychological leap," and that the Godesberg and Prague crises may have been necessary occurrences for a decision to confront Hitler (1052-58).

Steiner's emphasis on the "Hitler's War" concept makes it clear that she gives enormous weight to causal variables at the individual level of analysis.7 She gives particular weight to the "core beliefs" and ideologies of political leaders in all of the major powers. She argues that personality, beliefs, national and racial stereotypes, and historical experience exerted an "equal if not stronger force" as military and economic strength on "decision-making at the top" (1048-49).8

This is a revealing phrase, because for Steiner it was decision-making at the top that really mattered. Steiner emphasizes that political leaders enjoyed "remarkable autonomy" from societal-level forces (1048). This was true not only for Hitler, Stalin, and Benito Mussolini, but also for Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier, despite the constitutional and

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8 Individual-level factors mattered much less in France. Steiner argues that French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier did not share Chamberlain's illusions about Hitler, and that French policy was driven by realpolitik in the context of severe external, economic, and domestic political constraints (651-52).
political constraints in the British and French systems. Steiner repeatedly emphasizes the importance of ideology, but it was the world views of top-level political leaders, not the ideologies or political cultures of entire societies, that shaped the actions of states. Steiner notes, for example, that ideological differences between Britain and the Soviet Union seriously complicated efforts to form an anti-German alliance, but for Steiner it was largely Chamberlain’s belief system, not the ideology of his constituency or of business interests, that played the major role.²

True, it is not entirely possible to separate the belief systems of political leaders from the societal-level attitudes and ideologies of the times. Shared attitudes, ideas, identities, norms, and meanings, and how they are socially constructed, reproduced, and changed though repeated interactions, are central to constructivist theories of international relations.¹⁰ Steiner says that “core beliefs ... to an important extent created reality as it was perceived by statesmen” (1048), but I interpret Steiner as giving more emphasis to the individual construction of reality that to the social construction of reality. She clearly emphasizes individual agency, something international relations constructivists have not fully embraced.¹¹

Norms, rules, and assumptions have a place in Steiner’s analysis, but she emphasizes that these were not fully shared by statesmen and that differences in perceptions and experiences contributed to important misperceptions. Steiner argues that “while the democratic leaders felt they were playing a common game with one set of rules, in fact everyone was playing a different game with the same pieces” (1050).

The key to understanding British policy along the road to war, Steiner argues, is through the experiences, world view, and personality of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. More specifically, it was Chamberlain’s abhorrence of war in reaction to the horrendous experience of the First World War, and his determination to avoid another European war at all costs, that shaped his strategies for dealing with Hitler and the crises of the late 1930s. With respect to Munich, for example, Steiner writes that “Chamberlain did not go to Germany to win time for rearmament; he went to prevent war and to lay the basis for a future continental peace” (648).

Chamberlain’s hatred of war affected his judgments as well as his policy goals. Steiner argues that Chamberlain’s “obsession with preserving the peace marred his judgment” and contributed to a “fatally flawed” image of Hitler’s intentions. Chamberlain believed that he

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¹¹ Steiner’s discussion of “core beliefs” is captured by the concept of the “operational code” of political leaders as defined by Alexander L. George, “The ‘Operational Code’: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decisionmaking,” International Studies Quarterly 13, 2 (June 1969): 190-222.
had “created a bond” with Hitler and “won his respect” and “trust” (651). He also believed that Hitler shared his own abhorrence of war, that his aims were limited, and that it was possible to work with him to secure a European peace. These beliefs were not entirely unreasonable early on, in Steiner’s view. The problem, she implies, is that Chamberlain failed to revise his beliefs in response to Hitler’s actions. Chamberlain continued to be optimistic about the prospects for peace after Munich, after Prague (766), and even in late August 1939 (1066).

In emphasizing the belief systems and perceptions of individual political leaders, Steiner devotes relatively little attention to the causal role of class or sectoral interests and divisions, or to public opinion as a whole. This will disappoint those international relations scholars who in the last decade have developed societal-level explanations for “underbalancing” (or delayed balancing) and applied these explanations to Britain and France in the 1930s. One argument is that Chamberlain adopted appeasement and a relatively limited pace of rearmament because his government represented a domestic coalition that benefited from low taxation and free market policies, and was unwilling to pay for significant increases in defense spending or tolerate the increased regulation of the market economy that would likely follow. Although Steiner generally minimizes the role of broad-based public opinion, she argues that after Munich and Prague “public pressure helped to push the [British] government to war” (765-66, 1056), in part by helping to isolate Chamberlain within the Cabinet.

Steiner’s minimization of the role of these factors is somewhat at odds with her remark in a separate essay that “the domestic determinants of foreign policy were as important as the external environment and ... political and moral factors were more critical than the economic and military determinants of policy-making.” Perhaps Steiner is defining “domestic” broadly to include individual as well as societal and governmental-level factors,

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12 Steiner makes a strong case, but she fails to acknowledge the other side of Chamberlain – his fairly frequent statements that Hitler could not be trusted and that a European war was probably unavoidable. This is clear from his private correspondence, especially with his sister Hilda. See The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, 4 vols., ed. by Robert Self (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000). A complete psychological portrait of Chamberlain needs to come to terms with this duality.


just as some international relations scholars aggregate these into a single “unit level” of analysis.\(^{15}\)

I now turn to Steiner’s critique of the argument that appeasement was a strategy for buying time. British aims, in this view, were to allow the combination of its own rearmament and the slowing of the German arms buildup to move Britain and its French ally into a position from which it could deter future German aggression if possible or defeat Germany in war if deterrence failed.\(^{16}\) As noted above, Steiner explicitly rejects this view. It seems to me, however, that Steiner underestimates Chamberlain’s mixed-motives at Munich: to lay the grounds for a lasting peace if possible while recognizing that because time was on the side of the Western allies it was imperative to delay any confrontation with Hitler.

The buying time for rearmament interpretation (whether applied to British behavior at Munich or to British appeasement policy in general) includes a number of assumptions: (1) by the time of Munich British leaders believed that Germany was too strong and that it would be too risky to confront Hitler, but that (2) the longer-term trends in the balance of power favored the Allied powers, in part because (3) German rearmament was slowing down because of resource, financial, and foreign exchange constraints. In addition, (4) Britain made a serious effort to accelerate rearmament after Munich, and (5) these factors were the primary motivations for the strategy of appeasing Hitler at Munich. Although Steiner rejects the last point, she provides a substantial amount of evidence in support of the first four assumptions.

One can find numerous statements throughout *The Triumph of the Dark* that Chamberlain and other British leaders believed that Germany was already too strong to confront at Munich. Intelligence reports repeatedly emphasized British and Allied inferiority. Britain was particularly vulnerable to a “knock out blow” from the air. In fact Steiner states that “the imbalance in the air was the most decisive strategic factor in dissuading the chiefs of staff from any attempt at deterrence” (608). She argues correctly that British estimates of German strength in the air and on land were both considerably exaggerated (607),\(^{17}\) but what is important for the buying time hypothesis is leaders’ perceptions, not reality.

France was also vulnerable. By fall 1936 the *Deuxième Bureau* was arguing that Germany had already achieved a decisive superiority over France on the ground and in the air (416). France began to rearm, but by 1938 rearmament was already beginning to strain France’s industrial base and finances, and the French government faced serious internal divisions

\(^{15}\) Waltz, 79-82.


(600, 652). Steiner argues that a realistic sense of French vulnerability, along with the need to solidify the Anglo-French alliance, was a major factor behind French caution at Munich (599-603).\textsuperscript{18}

On the second and third points, Steiner documents the financial and resource constraints on German rearmament, including shortages of oil, other raw materials, and labor; a balance of payments problem and a shortage of currency to purchase raw materials; pressures on German gold reserves; and the difficulties of securing foreign loans (674-75).\textsuperscript{19} She also demonstrates that by the time of Munich or soon thereafter British and French intelligence had accurately recognized these economic constraints and their implications for trends in relative power. These assessments were also shared by the German military, which as late as spring and summer 1939 expressed concerns about the difficulty of sustaining the rearmament effort and about Germany’s lack of readiness for war against Britain and France (834-38).

The fourth point presents a greater challenge to the buying time interpretation because, as Steiner correctly notes, Britain’s rearmament was somewhat restrained. Germany exploited the delay in war after Munich more than the Allied powers did, both through its own rearmament and also through its ability to secure an alliance with the Soviet Union (655). Chamberlain also rejected the pleas of many to substantially accelerate British military spending. Steiner traces this to Chamberlain’s abhorrence of war and in particular to his fear that rearmament might very well provoke the war he wanted so much to avoid.\textsuperscript{20} This was undoubtedly a contributing factor, but it is not at all incompatible with a buying time interpretation.

In addition, there are good reasons to believe that British rearmament may have been restrained even in the absence of Chamberlain’s idiosyncratic beliefs. As Steiner notes, the British economy was under severe pressure (700). Many shared the Finance Ministry’s repeated concerns that an excessively rapid pace of rearmament might impose further strains and undermine the economic foundations of British military power, and the belief that the ‘fourth arm of defense’ was critical for Britain’s ability to fight a long war of attrition based on naval power and blockade. Chamberlain’s earlier experience as Chancellor of the Exchequer undoubtedly reinforced these concerns.

It is also important to emphasize that the relevant criterion for evaluating British rearmament is not necessarily its ability to narrow the gap with Germany in terms of aggregate military power, but rather its effectiveness in dealing the greatest threats posed


\textsuperscript{19} See also Adam Tooze, \textit{The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy} (London: Viking/Penguin, 2006).

\textsuperscript{20} The belief that arms provoke rather than deter fits the “spiral model” image of international politics. Jervis, chap. 3.
to British interests. The primary British interests involved (in descending order) the security of the British Isles, the protection of trade routes necessary for survival, preservation of the empire, and the defense of allies. The key immediate threat was German airpower. Thus rearmament was focused on air defenses and the navy. In these terms, British rearmament was reasonably effective. 21 Steiner notes that British rearmament was driven by a defensive strategy involving the protection of the home islands and the ability to sustain a long war of attrition. She notes the substantial improvements in British radar and other defenses (605, 772), and concludes that in terms of its ability to defend itself Britain was “better off in 1939 than in 1938.” 22

Motivations are always difficult to assess, but there is much in The Triumph of the Dark to suggest that the logic of buying time had a significant impact on British policy. Steiner argues that “the Allied sense of military inferiority was a major factor in British and French decision-making at Munich,” 23 and that British Foreign Office and service ministries “viewed Munich primarily as a means of postponing war” (684). Steiner argues that in early 1939 “The service chiefs wanted to postpone war until 1940 when British defences would be much improved.” 24

It is interesting to note that although Steiner argues that Chamberlain was not driven by the strategic logic associated with the expectation that the German military advantage was only temporary, she makes a strong case that this was precisely the logic that motivated Hitler. The Führer pushed for a rapid rearmament program that his military and financial advisers warned could not be sustained, and he decided on a war in September 1939 that his generals said he could not win – both because he believed that time was running out. The Triumph of the Dark is full of evidence of Hitler’s belief that “time was not on Germany’s side” (1031), that underlying economic trends favored the Allies, and that Germany had to act before the Allies could make up for their slow start in rearming. 25 As


23 Ibid., 131.

24 Steiner makes the interesting comment that “while Chamberlain was not fundamentally motivated by strategic factors, the [military chiefs’] emphasis on British unpreparedness for war in 1938, and German strength, provided strong support for the policies [Chamberlain] intended to adopt” (605). One possible way to interpret this is to say that British appeasement policies under Chamberlain were overdetermined, in the sense that buying time logic and Chamberlain’s belief system were each sufficient causes of British appeasement at Munich.

25 Contributing to Hitler’s short time horizons was his obsession with his own health problems and mortality (568, 995)
Steiner says elsewhere, it was "Germany's dubious economic future that led Hitler to gamble on war ...."26

This leads me to the final decisions for war and the judgments and calculations upon which they were based. What is striking, particularly in the context of an international relations literature that is dominated by rational models of conflict, is that Steiner draws a picture of decision-making processes that are far from rational.

There is no single, widely accepted conception of rationality,27 but some significant deviations from rationality stand out in Steiner's narrative. One is that political leaders' assessments of adversary intentions and capabilities — and hence of the likelihood of various actions and outcomes — were often significantly influenced by their own policy goals. Steiner argues, for example, that because the European peace that Chamberlain so badly wanted was feasible only if Hitler shared that goal, Chamberlain judged Hitler's aims to be limited and consistent with the goal of peace. What was necessary to achieve his ends, Chamberlain saw as possible and even likely.

In terms of psychological theories of judgment and decision-making, Steiner is arguing that Chamberlain engaged in wishful thinking driven by motivated reasoning (or motivated biases).28 The same can be said of Hitler. The necessity of war for achieving his goals distorted his assessments of the likely economic consequences of his rapid rearmament effort and of the likely outcome of war itself, despite repeated warnings from his financial and military advisors.29 This pattern runs contrary to any conception of a rational decision-making process, which requires independent assessments of the utilities (values) of outcomes and their probabilities of occurrence.

Compounding this problem was the failure of Chamberlain and other leaders to update their beliefs in response to new information.30 As Steiner notes, Chamberlain's assessments of Hitler's character and intentions changed only marginally after Munich and Prague, lagging significantly behind the changes in public opinion and in the beliefs of his advisors. The problem was exacerbated by Chamberlain's own "excessive self-confidence" (651).

26 Steiner, "British Decisions," 131, 142. This argument reflects the underlying theoretical proposition that a potent cause of war is the combination of relative military strength and relative economic weakness that undermines future military potential, creating strong incentives for preventive war. Dale C. Copeland, The Origins of Major Wars (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).


28 On psychological biases see Jervis, Parts II & III; and Rose McDermott, Political Psychology in International Relations (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

29 Hitler's obsession with what he saw as an international Jewish conspiracy strangling the Reich (990) is still another indicator of Hitler's deviation from rationality.

30 Rational updating of beliefs is defined by "Bayesian updating."
Hitler’s attitudes towards war, as portrayed by Steiner, clearly depart from a Clausewitzian conception of war as an instrument of policy to advance political objectives. For Hitler, “war was the ultimate goal of all politics and the primal condition of life. The fixation on the idea of struggle as an end in itself was a leitmotiv that ran throughout his political life.” (823) "Hitler willed, desired, lusted after war" (1057). In terms of utility theory, Hitler attached positive utility to war itself, and not just to any more tangible benefits that war might bring. This is not easily reconciled with rationalist conceptions of war as a costly mechanism for the resolution of disputes.31

With respect to the final decisions for war, Steiner argues that neither the German nor British decisions to go to war over Poland were based primarily on strategic calculations.32 As Hitler had been repeatedly informed by his generals, Germany was not in a position to conduct a successful offensive against France and Britain; it had no military plans to do so (1030); and it could not mount a successful war of attrition. Steiner argues that Hitler understood this. For Hitler, war was an obsession and a matter of will (1034), with the timing decided by his awareness of adverse trends in relative power.

As for Britain and France, Steiner argues that this was a “necessary war,” given the reality of the German threat to dominate the continent and the need for a great power to “act as one.”33 France in particular had no choice. Steiner argues, however, that “British grand strategy had become divorced from all the normal calculations of costs and benefits in the last months of peace.”34 For Britain, war in 1939 was, “as Hitler had so often insisted, a matter of will rather than a careful weighing of the military and economic balances....Most did not think in terms of balances; they just assumed that Britain and its empire would prevail.” Steiner concludes that “It was fortunate ... that it was this assumption of victory and not its calculation that determined the choice for war” (1035).

This is an interesting argument, but it is problematic on a number of grounds. First, it is not clear that the assumption of victory was a cause of war as opposed to a consequence of the

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32 Steiner emphasizes, however, that Hitler wanted to localize the war against Poland, and she documents his extensive efforts, through bribery and coercive threats, to keep Britain out.

33 This last point is consistent with a constructivist emphasis on the “logic of appropriateness.” Steiner repeatedly emphasizes the importance of honor, prestige, status, and self respect for great power behavior in the 1930s (e.g., 1024), but she never analytically distinguishes these factors from reputation, which is rationalist and realist. On status and honor as a cause of war see Richard Ned Lebow, _Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War_ (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

decision for war, a psychological coping mechanism. Second, the existence of terrible choices and the bad outcomes associated with them does not necessarily preclude rational calculation. One can rationally go to war without expecting victory if the alternative is likely to lead to a worse outcome. Steiner may be right about the relative absence of strategic calculation in the British decision for war, and I remain open to that possibility. Before I could be fully convinced, however, I would need a more detailed analysis of British assessments of future trends, including the probability and likely outcome of a future war.

I have gone on too long, though I could have said ten times more about this magnificent book. It is an enduring contribution to a subject of enduring interest. There is little doubt that all future work on the international history of this period and on the causes of the Second World War will have to engage Steiner’s complex arguments and the massive amount of evidence she has compiled to support them.

35 For an argument, based on social psychology, that decision-makers shift from underconfidence to overconfidence after making a decision for war, see Dominic P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, “The Rubicon Theory of War: How the Path to Conflict Reaches the Point of No Return,” International Security 36:1 (Summer 2011): 7-40.