

Book Review

The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy, by Adam Tooze

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This is not an air power book; nor is it a 'conventional' history of the Second World War. It is, nevertheless, an extremely important volume for anyone involved in thinking about strategic level affairs. Anyone working on strategic level history; doctrine formulation; or planning the manipulation of the strategic levers of power should be aware of the all-encompassing dependence on economic planning and execution; this book illustrates the challenges in the context of the rise and fall of the Nazi economy from the aftermath of the shambles of the First World War.

It is very easy for contemporary proponents to recite the importance of coalition, or government, policy being subject to the exercise of the complete range of strategic levers. Conventionally, these include diplomatic, military, security (in its various guises), financial, economic and so forth. If the list were to be expanded to embrace subjects included in strategic planning tools it could also cover legal, environmental, sociological issues. Arguably religious considerations along with ideology should also feature. It is highly unlikely that any single individual employed in the strategic planning section – assuming such a beast exists – of the respective government departments will have the energy, education, experience, intellect and time to be able to master the complexities of all of these in the

context of planning. The planning may be long range, contemporaneous or conjectural but the greater the crisis, the less likely that time will be afforded, especially at the more senior levels. Nor can it be taken as a given that the raw information will be available from either open or covert sources. And even if available, the chances of consensus over the interpretation and analysis will be slight. Then deciding on an appropriate – all encompassing – comprehensive approach is even more problematic. The lack of suitable mechanism will, at best, hinder progress. The difficulties will inevitably be exacerbated if relations between departments are riddled with intrigue and petty politics. It will be even worse still if the politics – as in the case of the Third Reich – are far from trivial.

Tooze illustrates the problems faced by Germany in the aftermath of the First World War, through the advent of Hitler, into conflict and thence defeat at the hands of two economic systems that, whilst very different, were able to eradicate the much-vaunted Nazi war machine. Hitler had long anticipated the necessity for both struggles and strove to avoid them happening contemporaneously. Hitler, along with his colleagues in the Party and in industry, were well aware of the American industrial and economic potential, they consistently underestimated just what had been

achieved by the Soviets. Some of this was down to racist and ideological baggage; part owing to the lack of hard information as to what had been achieved in the vast factories east of the Urals. Interestingly, the Soviet dictatorship proved to be more adept (or ruthless) at building a homogenous war machine; Germany was constantly divided into factions each of which fought, variously, for profits, survival, influence and raw materials.

The avid reader of Second World War literature will be well acquainted with much of the military history and the accompanying diplomatic moves. But the economics of the situation are less well studied. And this was probably true of the planners at the time. Tooze explodes a number of myths in his treatment of the German economy. One of these is the widely held view that the war machine was coasting in the first two years of the War. Tooze highlights just how stretched Germany was in terms of foreign exchange necessary for vital raw materials (ranging from vitals metals and quality coal through to grain and basic foodstuffs); manpower; industrial capacity; transport capacity; and most of all energy. Tooze is ruthless in demolishing Speer's so-called 'armaments miracle' highlighting the foundations set in place by his predecessors and the failure to deliver – even in the face of the most draconian measures. The vicious exploitation of slave labour to the point of 'death through work' is illustrative of the pressure on all facets of the war economy.

These shortages increased markedly as the War progressed. Tooze highlights how an economy strained to breaking point was further damaged by the

efforts of Bomber Command and the United States Army Air Force. He is dismissive of the various post war bombing surveys commenting that they could hardly have been more slanted to produce negative conclusions. Tooze does not situate his assessments of the damage done to the war economy in the context of the targeting debates that had been waged so vociferously by different camps in the UK and US, but he very clearly concludes that the destruction of the energy reserves and the transportation system had brought industry to its knees. An interesting aside in the debate is his revelation that the damage done to the Ruhr was so extensive that Speer had to re-organise the labour force along 'para-military lines' with barracks style housing and the issue of uniforms. This sheds a new light on the definition of 'combatant' in an era of total war!

All of this begs the question as to how aware the Allied wartime planners were of the state of the German economy. The extent to which the subsequent debate was muddied by rhetoric and dogmatic adherence to unproven doctrine is unedifying. But the blame cannot be allowed totally to rest at the door of the 'bomber-barons'. There is a wider issue as to how well-suited the rest of the Whitehall and Washington planning teams were to coping with a comprehensive approach to total war. In turn, the political leaders have some responsibility in ensuring that their wider organisations were 'fit for purpose'. This in turn raises the question of how 'fit for purpose' the current system is in providing a mechanism for today's contemporary planners, doctrine writers and manipulators of the strategic levers of power.

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