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Brooke C. Stoddard, *World in the Balance: The Perilous Months of June-October 1940*. Washington: Potomac Books, 2011. Pp. xiii, 255. ISBN 978-1-59797-516-2.

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World in the Balance follows conventional periodization of the military and diplomatic crises in Great Britain in the summer of 1940, with chapters proceeding through the five relevant months. It thus opens with the surrender of France in June, continues through the “Battle of Britain” over the summer and early autumn, and ends with the start of the Blitz in October. The subject of this deeply flawed popular history is Britain’s response to the German threat over that critical five-month period, when its barely mobilized economy and armed forces and its Empire “stood alone” as a breakwater against the still rising tide of Nazi military advances.

Brooke C. Stoddard is a former editor at *Military Heritage* magazine and Time-Life Books. His style of writing, use (or lack) of citations, and his very short bibliography do not bespeak any advanced training in historical research. That is not necessarily a disqualifier: excellent popular accounts by non-historians abound. Indeed, some works by journalists and amateur historians in many ways surpass those of academic authorities. The best bring history to life for wider, highly appreciative, educated audiences with little patience for standard scholarly productions. But no work of history, academic or popular, should be so disfigured as this one is by factual errors and unsound critical assessments resting on wholly deficient secondary research.

Already in his inauspicious Introduction, Stoddard incorrectly identifies the Luftwaffe as “the largest military air force” in 1940 (xii), a distinction that belonged to the Soviet VVS (“Military Air Forces”) by several multiples. The book’s political assessments are even less reliable: for example, a facile elucidation of Nazism concludes that Hitler was a threat psychologically akin to the Daleks¹—“Resistance was futile” (xii). A potted history of the interwar years informs readers that, after World War I,

German soldiers were at first shocked and then outraged that they had fought so long and hard only to lose their emperor, their government, and their comrades in vain.... [They later formed] an organization [sic]... called the Freikorps.... [The Versailles Treaty,] as the various peace treaties are known [sic], [along with the League of Nations,] did collar Germany but it could not leash the hearts of its people.... [Hitler thereupon] set up what he called fascism, after *fasces*, a bundle of rods that was a symbol of power in classical Rome.... In Hitler’s view, pacifism was bad. Jews, being international, tended to pacifism and had to be resisted.... Joseph Goebbels, an embittered man with a nimble mind and a limp, had a talent for using radio, symbols, and mass rallies to affect popular opinion. (2-5, 7)

And so on. We are also told that the Weimar Republic was centered on President Paul von Hindenburg and that the Reichstag fire “almost certainly” was a “plot hatched and executed by the Nazis” (9). The sources cited for such muddled claims include a thirty-year-old encyclopedia article, a forty-year-old world history text, journalist William Shirer’s highly unreliable *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*,² and several *Wikipedia* articles, but seldom any of the easily available, respected, and dependable scholarly literature on the subject. As a result, Stoddard’s account of the goals of National Socialism and the origins of World War II is practically worthless.

In chapter 1, on the German western offensive in spring 1940, we are wrongly told that Hitler targeted Norway (and Denmark) “to secure delivery of their iron ore” (18), rather than the sea routes needed to bring Swedish ores south. In setting up the change in British prime ministers, Stoddard makes a passing reference

1. Of *Doctor Who* fame.

2. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1960. Incongruously, this is Stoddard’s main source on Versailles.

to Winston Churchill's World War I career, but ignores his central role in promoting the wrong-footed Allied intervention in Turkey or the damage the Gallipoli campaign did to his reputation, instead merely praising him as "a tested wartime administrator" (19). He also elides Churchill's role in the baleful Norway campaign, being either unaware of it or reluctant to undercut his own unbalanced and ill-informed hero's tale.

In chapter 2, we learn that, at the end of June, "Hitler was settling into his new headquarters, called Tannenberg [sic]" (48). Chapter 3 interrupts the chronology with a primer on interwar developments in cryptanalysis and early wartime code-breaking and the needless revelation that "the Germans wanted some way to keep their messages secret" (52). Chapter 4 treats British deliberations in July over what to do about the French surface fleet, then still under Vichy control but vulnerable to a German *coup de main*. This chapter deals, too, with the looming German bomber threat. Italian general Giulio Douhet's air power theories are thinly summarized, with little attention to far more relevant developments in interwar British air power doctrine and actual air defense preparations.

Stoddard's discussion of these important issues is mostly lifted uncritically from Churchill's own speeches and memoirs and a few histories ranging from solid to hagiographic.³ Hoary social legends about newfound British egalitarianism add a bit of spice: "titled aristocrats joined [the Home Guard], though they risked taking orders from their butlers or chauffeurs" (84–87).

Chapter 5 offers a quick recounting of the "battle of the beams"—the ongoing competition between the RAF and the Luftwaffe for radar, air defense, and navigational technology to aid their bombers. That drawn-out contest actually became far more complex and fierce *after* 1940. Stoddard makes the aerial struggle supremely decisive in that summer when the world supposedly lay in the balance, omitting any judicious analysis of the naval situation or the nature of German strategic intentions and deliberations.

Chapter 6 is a rehash of the success of "The Few" in the air battles over the Channel and southern England during August. Missing in the purple prose is any real discussion of Luftwaffe intentions and capabilities or German invasion plans, all key subjects well-covered in many histories. Stoddard also neglects the critical deterrent effect of the Royal Navy on the willingness of *Kriegsmarine* admirals to support the invasion plans of Hitler's generals. Chapter 7, on German radio propaganda and Oswald Mosley's British fascist movement, adds little to the overall story of strategic defense of Great Britain in summer 1940—ostensibly the central concern of the book. Readers are, however, informed that "A British investigation during the war found that during the winter of 1939–1940, three in six British citizens listened to Lord Haw-Haw's broadcasts regularly, two in six occasionally. Once Germany invaded Britain [!] on May 10, the size of the audience fell off to about 13 percent of the country" (145). Presumably, the other 87 percent were busy pushing imaginary Nazi invaders back into the Narrow Sea. This (typical) howler attests to the book's general low level of scholarship and factual accuracy.

Chapter 8, on September, returns to the air battle, with a conventional summary couched in orotund prose: "The RAF fighters raked [German bombers] with fire, zipped through them, and turned to come at them again. As the sun sank toward the horizon, planes fell from the sky.... Cockneys emerged in the daylight to find rows of homes reduced to rubble" (161, 163). Chapter 9, oddly entitled "Diplomacy: the Craft of Binding Friends and Stabbing Enemies," devotes undue attention to the idle doings of the Duke of Windsor, then moves to minor Spanish intrigues quite unrelated to the main course of the war in 1940, without, of course, citing any of the recent, very good English-language studies of wartime Spain. Stoddard has nothing insightful to say about Franco's diplomacy and fails to appreciate his abiding interest in joining the Axis—for the right price in German arms and economic aid.⁴ He wrongly asserts that Franco's active desire to

3. Including a single volume of his official biography: Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 6: *Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1983). Interwoven as well are bits of analysis from John Lukacs's *The Duel: 10 May–31 July, 1940* (NY: Ticknor & Fields, 1991), a flawed but vastly superior work to the one reviewed here.

4. See, among others, Sheelagh Ellwood, *Franco* (1994; rpt. NY: Longman, 2000); Stanley G. Payne, *Franco and Hitler: Spain, Germany, and World War II* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2008); Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (NY: Basic Books, 1994); Wayne H. Bowen, *Spaniards and Nazi Germany: Collaboration in the New Order* (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2000) and *Spain during World War II* (Columbia: U Missouri Pr, 2006).

bring Spain into the war had ebbed by October 1940, because Britain had not been defeated over the preceding summer. In fact, his interest lasted well past his infamous summit with Hitler later that month, an event Stoddard identifies as the critical moment of change (213). The usual en passant errors persist, such as the claim that Portugal's Salazar "owed his seat of power to the Nazis" (184).

A tedious "Postlude" summarizes the main thesis of *World in the Balance* as follows: "the British people rallied to their eloquent if pudgy prime minister and took the imperialist old soldier's voice for their own.... They could not allow themselves to be defeated. That was the work of these five months" (227). To paraphrase the old soldier himself, this is a cottage porridge of a history that has no theme.