REPEAT

A WARNING FROM HISTORY

REPEAT

A WARNING FROM HISTORY

Dennis Glover

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2025.
Originally published in Australia and New Zealand by Black Inc.
.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-3321-7

Typeset in 11.5/16.5pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd. Elcograf S.p.A

EU GPSR Authorised Representative
LOGOS EUROPE, 9 rue Nicolas Poussin, 17000, LA ROCHELLE, France
E-mail: Contact@logoseurope.eu

CONTENTS

Part II
FARCE

To Volodymyr Zelensky. Who else?

völkisch – *adjective (of a person or ideology), populist or nationalist and typically racist*

populist – *a person, especially a politician, who strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups*

– Oxford Languages

PREFACE

Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

– Siegfried Sassoon, *Aftermath*, March 1919

The populists are back. The 1920s and '30s have returned. The first time around, it was all so new. We were taken by surprise, disoriented, knocked off our feet, terrified, cowed. This time we have no excuse. We know the populists' game plan. And we know that unless we show the strength to face them down, disaster will follow. If you doubt me, read on.

In this struggle, history is our friend. The similarities between then and now are clear and unsettling. The same patterns are unfolding before our eyes. To stop them repeating in full, we need to learn the lessons of the past. It won't be enough to rely on others for this knowledge; we must all be historians now. And as citizen-historians our task is simple: to stop the Second World War being followed by a Third. Armed with the lessons of history, we must demand our governments and political parties act strongly and with courage.

Learn, good people. Fast.

INTRODUCTION

Switch on the news channel right now. Does it all look somehow familiar? Ranting populists. Phoney elections. Politicised courts. Attempted putsches. Assassinations. Bullets to the back of the head. Wars. Tank battles. Cities bombed flat. Calls for caution and non-intervention. Angry mobs coming for the Jews, for the Muslims and for sundry 'others'. Facts that are difficult to distinguish from lies. A world of unthinkable savagery. If it looks familiar, it's because you read about such things at school. In history class.

On 6th January, 2021, a thought occurred to me while watching Donald Trump's right-wing vigilantes storm the Capitol building in Washington, DC: perhaps history really does repeat. A clock started ticking in my mind.

Let's go back. It's 1923, and in Munich, a nascent political party, led by a ridiculous street corner agitator named Adolf Hitler, attempts a putsch against the Weimar Republic. It fails. Hitler is arrested and jailed but released soon after by sympathetic judges and politicians,

enabling him to run again when the times suit him better. Sound familiar?

Fast-forward ten years. It's now 1933, the height of a global economic depression, and that same easily dismissed nobody has taken power and started dismantling German democracy. The first concentration camp opens, in Dachau. Laughed at and disregarded by all upstanding people, Hitler has the last laugh. The clock ticks on . . .

In the Soviet Union, a dictator named Joseph Stalin is busy wiping out all who might one day oppose him. His favoured method: a single pistol shot to the back of the head – fully reported in the press, as a warning to all who might consider crossing him in future. Familiar?

Over the next six years, populism and extremism spread across Europe. Hitler, Stalin, Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco preach hatred and consolidate their power. The term 'propaganda' begins to take on its now familiar meaning and a young political writer, George Orwell, realises that facts are not only being disputed, they are also being invented. News is becoming fake. The populist dictators become commonplace, accepted, respectable. When they ask for national boundaries to be revised and treaties to be abandoned, many see the logic of their case and negotiate with them. And then, when they break their word, their opponents do nothing. *Tick, tick, tick* . . .

By 1936, the first battles of the new age start in Europe – in Spain. The open-air massacres of thousands of innocent people – in town squares and bullfighting rings – begin.

The first cities are terror-bombed. In Guernica, where hundreds are killed, the German perpetrators fabricate fantastic evidence that the Basques destroyed their own city to embarrass the Luftwaffe. The world looks on, horrified, but does little to intervene. *It is just a local war*, the nervous statesmen say. *Not our fight. And anyway, what can we do? Tick, tick, tick . . .*

More camps open. In 1935 Germany begins openly to re-arm. The democracies do nothing . . . In 1938 Germany annexes Austria, claiming to return it to the Fatherland. Nothing . . . Six months later, Hitler demands that the German-speaking regions of Czechoslovakia be ceded to Germany as well. The democracies help him, but at least this time they have qualms. They are slowly waking up . . . Then, in November 1938, the sound of breaking glass heralds the beginning of the end for European Jewry. The time to take preventive action has run out.

We all know what happened after 1939. The big tank battles began. Cities were razed. Concentration camps became extermination camps. All those reasons for not acting earlier suddenly sounded like moral cowardice. Something to regret. Midnight approached . . .

We can discern five stages from the 1920s and '30s that we must not allow to repeat:

1. Sowing the wind – we created the economic conditions that made it difficult to maintain social harmony and political stability.

2. Populism – we allowed those willing to exploit hatred to take power and claim legitimacy.

3. Savagery – animated by culture wars and political intolerance, we saw our world descend into a new era of murder and violence that targeted political opponents, journalists, artists and 'the other'.

4. Preliminary war – we let the populists plan and win early wars when standing up to them might have ended their threat.

5. Consequences – we awoke at last to the reality of massacres and world war.

Is the pattern repeating? In this short book – short because we need to digest its message quickly and respond immediately – I set out to show the uncanny similarities between then and now: our unwillingness to see things until it's too late; our vulnerability to demagogues; the anger of our 'betrayed' electorate; the hate-laden speeches of our populist leaders; their shocking brutality towards opponents; the ugliness of our cultural battles; the spreading poison of racism; the steady disappearance of the concept of the truth; the return of war with its medieval massacres and mass bombing of cities. Ultimately, I want people to grasp just how extraordinary and ugly current events are compared to those of just a couple of decades ago, and how totally inadequate our responses. I

want the world to recognise that in many crucial ways, the big failures of the 1920s and '30s are already upon us, and that we have to act now on the lessons of those failures to prevent the greater horror of the 1940s also repeating. I provide no step-by-step programme of action; action must respond to fast-changing events. Instead, I sound an alarm. Because before we can save our world from the savage triumph of the populists, we need to wake from our slumbers and recognise the dangerous reality we now inhabit: a world edging ever closer to repeating 1939.

My story concentrates on the patterns of politics observable in the West, mostly in Russia, Ukraine, the rest of Europe and the United States. But readers will recognise where the lessons of the 1920s and '30 have relevance across the world, where nationalist strongmen with nativist agendas are entrenching their long-term power: in the religious exclusivism of Narendra Modi's right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); in the aggressive territorial revanchism of Xi Jinping's determination to absorb Taiwan and restore China's past greatness; in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's authoritarian presidential rule in Turkey; and in Indonesia, where the newly elected former military officer Prabowo Subianto is entering the presidency with a notorious record of human rights abuse. All will be watching to see whether, in such an unpropitious environment, democracies have the resolve to defend their liberal values or surrender them to populist challengers.

So let's observe events as they unfolded, using, where we can, the insights of the people who saw it all going wrong and tried to stop what followed. And let's commence where it all started to go wrong: when the young began to die.

PART I

TRAGEDY

War! I started thinking about it again. It's coming soon, that's certain.

– George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air*, 1939

CHAPTER 1

SOWING THE WIND

Wednesday 12th March 1919, the arrival of Spring. Siegfried Sassoon, captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, returned to his rooms in Merton Street Oxford to find a letter on the writing table by the window. His spirits were low. Even opening the cheerful polychromatic curtains given to him by the socialite Ottoline Morrell, revealing the sunny view across Merton College's gardens towards Christ Church Meadows, couldn't brighten him. He had come to Oxford to gain some sort of mental equilibrium after four years of war. Peace had come and like hundreds of millions of people across the world, he needed to 'adjust'. He didn't quite know what he had expected to find in the university town – seriousness maybe, or perhaps a mental peace so that he could put war poetry behind him for good. Instead, he had been vacuumed up into endless socialising, whose gaiety was beginning to anger him. The young were prancing about, lightly touching the ground, as if the past

four years had never happened. His brother Hamo, his best friend David Thomas, and his poetic disciple Wilfred Owen – the latter killed pointlessly in the last week of the war – appeared to have died for nothing. Memories of their faces, their peculiar walks, their voices . . . were starting to fade. It was only sixteen weeks since the Armistice had brought the murdering to an end, but the people had already moved on, like onlookers after a cleared up automobile accident. An election had been held and the politicians had already turned the deaths of his beloved friends into revenge and votes, and the makings of another war.

Wearily, he sat at his chair and opened the message. It was on War Office letterhead. He had been officially discharged from service. His army days were over. Here was the final break from the slaughter. A time to start again, and to accept the gay parties without guilt. A time to sing. Instead, an anger filled him. He reached for his pen and writing pad and, in that way he commonly wrote, as if from memory even though the words were wholly new, began to write. It all came flooding back: the fighting at Mametz, the rats, the stench, the corpses decaying in the front line trench, the cold, dirty rain. Then the question that had was now filling every waking and nightmarish thought:

Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

The Great War would haunt Sassoon for the rest of his life and no matter how hard he tried to get everyone to remember the horrors, and keep remembering them, for many it all soon began to fade. It was all going to happen again, alright – that much seemed certain. Within just four months and one day, humanity had made its first step towards another war. It had started to forget. The second disaster wouldn't be long in coming.

◊

Four and a half years earlier, in early August 1914, the 31-year-old Treasury official John Maynard Keynes watched in despair as his beloved King's College in Cambridge emptied of undergraduates, rushing off to enlist in the newly declared war against Germany. One of them, a patriotic Hungarian named Ferenc Békássy, had decided to return to Hungary to fight for the enemy. Failing to dissuade him but respecting his friend's wishes, Keynes high-mindedly paid his fare for the journey home.

Some eight months later, on 25th April 1915, Keynes fell into a depression. The day prior, he had learned that two young college students he had been fond of had been killed in the early fighting in France. Now, even worse news had arrived: another Kingsman, the famous poet Rupert Brooke, was also dead. 'It is too horrible, a nightmare to be stopt anyhow,' Keynes wrote to his lover, Duncan Grant. 'May no other generation live under the cloud we have

to live under.' Three months later, Békássy too was dead. Keynes, always philosophically and intuitively against the war, was beginning to grasp its true human horror.

◊

By the time the war finally ended, on 11th November 1918, Keynes' friends had joined one of the great slaughters of human history. The catastrophe had swallowed up 1.8 million Germans, 1.7 million Russians, 1.4 million French, 1.3 million Austro-Hungarians, three-quarters of a million British, and another 200,000 from the British Empire. The dead were not the only victims. The broken bodies and scarred minds were countless.

Inevitably, Keynes was suffering from a heavy conscience. To the question 'What did *you* do in the war?' he might have answered: 'I did my best to keep it away from my friends and the parts of civilisation I valued.' As a senior adviser to the Treasury, he had begun in 1914 by trying to limit the war's effect on Britain – by arguing that Britain's contribution should be naval and financial, blockading German ports and funding others to do the bulk of the fighting. He wanted Britain to contribute two dozen field divisions, not the seventy Prime Minister Lloyd George later got. If soldiers had to die, Keynes reasoned, best that they were people he didn't know. But Lloyd George won the argument, leading to the slaughters of the Somme, Passchendaele and the Hindenburg Line.

Privately, Keynes had wanted negotiations and a peace compromise, but his day job was to help finance the killing, mainly with American money. 'I work for a government I despise for ends I think criminal,' he wrote to Duncan Grant. David 'Bunny' Garnett, a friend whom Keynes had helped keep out of the fighting, told him he was a 'genie taken incautiously out of King's [College] . . . by savages to serve them faithfully for their savage ends'. You can see Keynes' problem. During the war, even his closest friends had started to disrespect him. But now, with the fighting finally over, he was determined to make amends. He was going to try to stop it all happening again.

◊

In January 1919 Keynes was in France as chief Treasury representative to the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. He soon lost heart. The politicians were playing their usual games, courting popularity by trying to make the Germans accept guilt for the war and pay for the damage they had caused, using money they didn't have. To Keynes this was folly, a 'concoction of greed and sentiment, prejudice and deception'. How could mere words on a dictated treaty magically maintain the peace, especially now that the will, and the armies needed to enforce it, had melted away? It was madness. How could the politicians not see that east of France and Belgium, Europe was in the throes of violent revolution and vicious anarchy? Empires,

governments, bureaucracies, police forces, ruling classes, legal systems, food distribution and an ordered and peaceful way of life . . . all were dissolving simultaneously.

The newspapers were full of horrors. The revolution in Russia had spread to Germany and Hungary. Bands of angry, demobilised troops roamed the cities and countryside looking for Reds and food, slaughtering their opponents and assassinating their leaders. Children were dying of malnutrition, their parents of tuberculosis, some having lost limbs or their minds. 'In continental Europe,' Keynes wrote, 'the earth heaves and no one but is aware of the rumblings. There it is not just a matter of extravagance or "labour troubles"; but of life and death, of starvation and existence, and of the fearful convulsions of a dying civilisation.' He could feel the rumblings under civilisation's feet. He knew that the vicious, murdering populists were coming.

The only hope was to get the politicians and the people to recognise that the answer lay not in political punishment or the exchange of territories but in restoring finance, trade and prosperity. Keynes had grasped a truth others had yet to see: 'Men will not always die quietly.' Feed them and a return to normalcy was possible.

Keynes resigned from his job at the Treasury, returned to his rooms at Cambridge and, sitting in his favourite armchair, with a board on his lap, poured his anguish into a short book: *The Economic Consequences of the Peace.*

Successfully settling the peace, it argued, required the Allied leaders at Versailles to accept the very thing they couldn't accept: that Germany had to be assisted back to economic greatness. Reparations had to be limited, German war debts guaranteed by all, and its rebuilding financed by bonds backed by American loans. Only then could trade and prosperity return to Europe. If not, there were two stark alternatives for Germany: revolution or reaction. Which would it be?

But the leaders didn't listen. The punitive reparations bill and war guilt clause remained. The wind had been sowed.