



## Essay

### AUGUST 1941. THE ATLANTIC CHARTER AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE<sup>1</sup>

*By Volker Berghahn*

Viewed from across the Atlantic, it is no doubt remarkable that a growing number of prominent historians, Ute Frevert and Hartmut Kaelble among them, have been vigorously promoting the notion of a “Europeanization” of German historiography whose predominant focus so far has been the rise and development of the modern nation-state. Whether this has something to do with the *Zeitgeist* of the enlarging European Union or is due to the fact that multi-volume national histories like those by Thomas Nipperdey and Hans-Ulrich Wehler have lost their allure, it represents a shift that is presumably permanent. But there is also the shift in perspective that looks beyond Europe and is global, even if it is too early to say how this new kind of transnational and transregional history will develop.

Furthermore, there is the related question of the continuities and discontinuities in European history. As far as the 20th century is concerned, 1914, 1917, 1933, 1945, and 1989 have long been identified as major turning points and have been examined in innumerable studies. The argument underlying this essay is that 1941 was perhaps the most crucial year in the history of Europe, if not of the world, during the past century.

The choice of this year was partly determined by the fact that this year is marked by the decision of the Nazi regime to initiate the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. However, this decision was delimited in the sense that this was the beginning of the mass murder of the Jews of Europe. There is, of course, evidence that Hitler and his anti-Semitic cronies would also have targeted Jews in other parts of the world, but this presupposed a victory against the Soviet Union which would then have provided the launching pad for further territorial conquests. Given Hitler’s fanaticism, to this extent Jews all over the world were potentially in danger.

To be sure, in the absence of a written order, the precise date of Hitler’s decision remains unclear, even though it, too, seems to be related to American behavior and policy. Tobias Jersak has dated it to the summer 1941 and linked it directly to the proclamation of the Atlantic Charter which the Führer is said to have interpreted as evidence of the obsessively suspected anti-Nazi conspiracy.<sup>2</sup> Christian Gerlach, Saul Friedländer and others have put the decision into December 1941, following the American entry into World War II and the sense that Europe’s Jews were no longer useful as hostages to keep Roosevelt from officially joining Churchill and Stalin.

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1 Essay relates to source: “Freedom from fear and want.” The Atlantic Charter (1941). A printed version of the essay is published in: Hartmut Kaelble, Rüdiger Hohls (Hgg.): *Geschichte der europäischen Integration bis 1989*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2016, S. 53–58, Band 1 der Schriftreihe *Europäische Geschichte in Quellen und Essays*.

2 Brinkley, Douglas; Facey-Crowther, David A. (eds.), *The Atlantic Charter*, New York 1994, pp. xxvii–xxviii.

However, this contribution is primarily concerned with another context that points beyond the traditional boundaries of Europe. 1941 is not only the year when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union; it is also the year when Mussolini expanded into North Africa in hopes of conquering Egypt and when the Japanese overran the Chinese mainland and made plans to move into Southeast Asia.

As to Hitler's eastern campaign, he and his generals confidently expected in the summer of 1941 the quick and early collapse of the Red Army after German troops had reached the outskirts of Moscow in a number of daring pincer movements that netted several hundred thousand Russian prisoners of war. No less telling, in anticipation of a swift victory that would give the Germans access to vast territories and their raw materials, an army of ministerial bureaucrats and academics at various research institutes had developed ambitious postwar plans.

It might be argued that they merely produced worthless blueprints of the kind that are always compiled in such circumstances. However, in this case, they were more than pieces of paper written by eager civil servants. There can be little doubt that in the face of impending triumph, many of them would have been implemented. Indeed, the regime was so committed to its war aims that the policies of systematic looting and mass murder that had begun in Poland in 1939 were simply extended into the Soviet Union with the help of organizations and precepts that had been established in 1940/41.

This included the inhuman practices of ethnic cleansing, mass liquidations, deportations of the Polish inhabitants of the country's western parts to the Generalgouvernement in the South-East from where the able-bodied among them were recruited as slave laborers. It also included the countless groups of agricultural experts and managers of German industrial and commercial enterprises who scoured the occupied territories for economic resources and opportunities to take over former Soviet production facilities. The aim was, for one, to create resettlement opportunities for ethnic Germans from the Baltic states and Transylvania. The second objective was to build an economic empire that was geared exclusively to the economic needs of Germany.

Accordingly, the travellers from Germany tried to introduce the same principles of a centralized command economy that was highly cartelized through agreements between independent firms over prices and conditions, while upholding the principle of private property. As regards the country's involvement in the world market, the achievement of self-sufficiency and a far-reaching de-coupling from the international system became the priority. In 1941, the economist Arno Sölter wrote an influential brochure which he entitled *Grossraumkartell*, as a model of how the Germans proposed to reorganize the economic structures of the occupied nations.

After 1945, some radical-rightist circles promoted a very misleading interpretation of what the Nazi New Order represented. It was presented as a realization of the old dream of a united Europe in which its non-Jewish and non-Slavic populations and governments would all happily cooperate as equal partners in a world of large regional blocs. This was also a much more ambitious framework of European integration and world politics than the "Fortress Europe" that emerged from 1943 when Nazi Germany found itself on the defensive and faced Allied invasions from all sides. This means that from all we know, Europe was to be organized in 1941 as a formal empire in which the various peripheral parts would be geared to the dominant interests of the Reich. German power would be exerted without much regard to the needs and expectations of Berlin's neighboring societies. Wherever there was not compliance and collaboration but

resistance to this concept, German military superiority would be used brutally to eradicate the opponents.

These German aspirations and developments must be seen against the background of Mussolini's activities in the eastern Mediterranean and Japan's efforts to create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" based on the subjugation of the indigenous peoples and their economic exploitation. What has been said so far is the proverbial one side of the coin. The other side is represented by the Soviet entry into the war in June 1941 and that of the United States that same December.

The Americans came into the conflict after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war against the United States. But once they were in, the defeat of the Axis powers Germany, Japan, and Italy was merely a matter of time. The Allied victory was anticipated by contemporaries and is reflected in a simple comparison of industrial output. Thus in 1943, with the American war production machine in high gear, the Allies produced military hardware in the value of 62.5 billion US Dollar as against 18.3 billion US Dollar churned out by Germany and Japan. In short, the Axis never came close to matching American output and, in a tacit admission of their material inferiority, typically relied increasingly on will power and individual heroism as the allegedly more important factors that would bring the Allies to their knees.

What has been said so far takes us to the question of the war aims that the Americans were beginning to develop in the summer 1941. In the face of the isolationism into which the United States had retreated after 1918 and even more so after the start of the Great Slump that rocked the world economy after 1929, a *sauf que* attitude became widespread. By the beginning of the Second World War those who wanted to re-engage the United States in the world economy were still in a minority. The rest of the population was not yet prepared for a realignment. Consequently, it took some time for an infrastructure to emerge that could begin to work on Allied peace aims in greater detail.

It is against this background that the acceptance of the text of the Atlantic Charter gains its significance. In it, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill developed the contours of a peace that looked totally different from the one that Hitler envisioned for Europe and with which the United States entered the war a few months later. The document was drawn up as part of a conference that the two leaders held on board of warships in Placentia Bay off the coast of Newfoundland. It is not quite clear where the first draft originated. Churchill later claimed it for himself. However, it seems that Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's right-hand person, tipped off Churchill before the meeting that a draft declaration of this kind was expected. Finally, there is the assertion of Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under secretary, that he wrote down the draft early in the morning of August 10 and that Churchill merely made a few unimportant changes. However, the intermediate negotiations between the two sides were not entirely harmonious where the future of the British Empire was concerned. Roosevelt had at one point remarked that extracting raw materials from colonies without promoting the industrialization of those regions was an outmoded method of international relations that could not secure postwar peace and stability. Churchill, who had once remarked that he had not become prime minister to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire, did not like this idea. And so, for the sake of Allied cooperation, references that related to equal access to the raw materials of the world were deleted and those that mentioned open trade were watered down to a vague sentence that existing obligations were to be respected.

But whatever the immediate origins of the Atlantic Charter, the document demonstrates very impressively what kind of world Roosevelt and Churchill thought about at exactly the same moment when the Axis powers began to realize their visions of a New European Order. The contrast could not have been starker and offers a good glimpse of the two worlds that confronted each other during this crucial year in European and indeed world history.

Some scholars have argued that the proclamation of these universalist aims was not purely altruistic and reflected a continuity in American foreign policy that was in effect imperialistic, though in an informal sense of economic penetration without military occupation. While it is possible to find evidence of such a design in later years, as revealed by “revisionist” historians such as Gabriel Kolko, it seems more likely that Roosevelt’s Atlantic Charter was born from a defensive mentality and the urgent need to rally the resistance against the so patently aggressive Axis powers.

In 1941, it was difficult enough to move the American population away from its isolationism. There was also the problem that the liberal democracies of the West had barely recovered from the prolonged depression with its mass unemployment that had sown many doubts about the future viability of liberalism. Authoritarianism in its rightist or leftist guise appeared in the eyes of many to be the wave of the future. In this situation and at a time when Japan was expanding into mainland Asia, the Soviet Union faced military collapse, and Britain was the only European power left to confront Hitler, it seemed important to enunciate the principles of an alternative vision of world order to those of the Axis powers.

It is also interesting to look at the evolution of attitudes in Washington. For some time, Roosevelt had been no less alarmed by the aggressiveness of the fascist powers than Churchill who, by this time, was involved in a war with Hitler. Thus, the President used his weekly radio fireside chat on 29 December 1940 to talk about the “two worlds that stand opposed to each other.” A few weeks later, he spoke of the “four freedoms” – from want and fear and of religion and information – whose preservation he deemed essential. Pushed by his advisors to elaborate on these axioms as a way of formulating an alternative to the new orders envisioned by the Axis powers and also of convincing the American people that basic values and principles were at stake, the ground for the Atlantic Charter was being prepared in the weeks before August. And since the Charter had mentioned only two of the four freedoms (from want and fear), Roosevelt, in a speech before the US Congress on 21 August 1941, explicitly included the other two. Stalin signed on to the Charter a month later.

In light of all this, it is surprising but perhaps typical that neo-Nazi circles advanced the argument after the war that Himmler’s SS with its recruits from many other European countries had fought for the New Europe that was emerging in the Western parts of the region after 1945 and that Hitler’s New Order anticipated the postwar European community and the West’s struggle against communism. It should be clear that nothing was further from the truth and that there is simply no valid comparison to be made, both in terms of Allied peace aims during the Second World War and of the structures and spirit of cooperation and equality that pervaded the emergent European Community after its end.

When this Community was forged, first in the shape of the European Coal and Steel Community, there were some who thought of it as a Continental association rather than an Atlantic one. While such tendencies also emerged later on in the unification process, for example, in the shape of Gaullism, the United States, as the hegemonic power of the

West, always insisted that the orientation of the Community had to be Atlanticist. It had to be politically democratic and economically open and geared to the multilateral, liberal-capitalist world trading system without imperial blocs and cartels that Washington envisioned in 1941 and was determined to implement after 1945.

All this is meant to stress the significance of 1941 for the future of Europe and indeed the rest of the world. Hitler came very close to defeating Stalin that summer. The tide then turned and the Second World War was won by the Allies in the East with enormous sacrifices on the part of the Russian army and population. But the American contribution was also indispensable and the Allied victory then facilitated, at least in the Western half, the construction of a peaceful and democratic Europe that we have today and that tries to live by the principles of the Atlantic Charter and the basic human rights and freedoms that are also enshrined in the European Union.

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