

## CHAPTER 5

### THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND HITLER

Though politically the 1920s had been a period of upheaval for Germany, the new Weimar Republic's greatest challenge did not begin until the waning days of the decade. The stock market crash in October of 1929 in the United States soon had its effect in other countries. Germany, heavily indebted to American investors and financiers, and deeply dependent on it as a market, soon felt the economic pressure to a severity perhaps unparalleled among the industrial nations of the world, with the possible exception of Japan. Germany's unemployment reached 35 percent<sup>1</sup> at the peak of the Depression, while the highest rate in the United States was only 25 percent.

Once again, a key Mormon player in this affair was Reed Smoot, who had been fighting for protective tariffs for the United States since he entered the Senate. His primary objective had been to protect the Utah sugar industry in which Utah farmers had a strong financial interest. In this matter, unlike the League of Nations affair, Smoot received strong support from Church leaders, including President Heber J. Grant.<sup>2</sup> But Smoot

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Wilhelm Kelling, Deutsche Kulturgeschichte, [German Cultural History], (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 337.

<sup>2</sup>Aydelotte, 63.

wanted to increase tariffs further and as the Depression intensified, he found the United States Congress more receptive to his ideas than ever before.

During the 1920s there had been an increased glut of some international commodities and Smoot feared that under the pressure of the Depression, if no protective tariff were imposed:

agriculture and industry would be ruined, unemployment would increase to enormous proportions and the United States would sacrifice its own enterprise and its own economic [sic] for the sake of foreign producers.<sup>3</sup>

He believed that in order to protect American jobs, tariff barriers should be erected to restrict the import of goods which competed with those produced by the American worker. The tariff, he concluded, was not selfish, but instead promoted fairness against goods produced by underpaid foreign workers and insured higher wages for Americans.

In response to the Smoot-Hawley Tariff, other nations raised<sup>4</sup> their own duties to counter what they perceived to be an imbalance created by the American tariff. These protectionist policies further limited international trade throughout the world and intensified the magnitude of the Depression.<sup>5</sup> In response to

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<sup>3</sup>"Senator Smoot Credits Tariff as U.S. Saver," Deseret News, 17 April 1931.

<sup>4</sup>Elbert Thomas claimed that Great Britain had raised import duties in retaliation to the Smoot-Hawley tariff. He attempted to lay blame on Smoot for the problem. "Smoot and Thomas Offer Views on Tariff Pact," Salt Lake Tribune, 14 October 1932.

<sup>5</sup>Bailey, 734.

the call to lower the tariff, in the hope that other countries would do the same, Smoot said:

Anyone who has watched the development of the current situation must be struck by the absurdity of the belief that other nations would reduce their tariffs during this critical period if Uncle Sam took the lead.<sup>6</sup>

Smoot was correct, at least, about the question of timing. Once the tariff had been raised it would be difficult to orchestrate a general rollback by means of a unilateral lowering, but the wisdom of initiating the bill in the first place is dubious.

Smoot also helped determine the disposition of war debts under the cloud of the Depression. In spite of persistent demands for payment relief from the European nations, Smoot favored the continuation of the repayment schedule, though he believed it necessary to extend the obligation for a few years in view of the impending crisis.<sup>7</sup> In an article for the Improvement Era, Smoot wrote:

Nations cannot be criticized for levying taxes to pay their debts. The cost of the war appalling as it is must be paid. That nation which recognizes this obligation as inescapable and settles down to work with a view to liquidating it as soon as possible is deserving of high commendation. But there is little disposition in Europe to take that view of the situation. Unfortunately, European governments are hoping to impose upon the United States a disproportionate share of the war costs

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<sup>6</sup>Reed Smoot, "The Tariff as a Shock-Absorber Against Depression," Salt Lake Tribune, 3 January 1932.

<sup>7</sup>Smoot sent a telegram to Frederick William Wile commenting that the "world owes a debt of gratitude to president Hoover for initiating the plan for a moratorium on world war debts." Smoot to Wile, 5 July 1931, Reed Smoot Collection.

while they devote their own funds to the maintenance of equipment for another war.<sup>8</sup>

Smoot continued to believe that a future war could be averted if governments would divert more of their revenue from armaments toward peaceful economies. "War debts," Smoot contended,

are not the root of Europe's troubles. The cost of maintaining excessive armaments is a far greater burden upon the people than payment of national debts.<sup>9</sup>

These debts, Smoot contended, were the "impediment that [made] hostilities impractical."<sup>10</sup> It was only through "wide spread realization of the suffering that war entails [that there] will come a determination to keep the peace."<sup>11</sup> John A. Widtsoe agreed:

On every hand is the cry that American reparations demands are the cause of European troubles. That is patently not so, but it is true that war debts are Europe's insurance against her own immediate folly. Without reparation payments, Europe would think less of peace and more on spending her surplus, and more on preparation for war.<sup>12</sup>

It appears that Smoot and Widtsoe were not alone. Most Mormons and Americans, smarting from the war, felt that exacting a punishment would insure peace.

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<sup>8</sup>"War Debts and Disarmament," Manuscript for the Improvement Era, 2, Reed Smoot collection, [n.d.].

<sup>9</sup>Reed Smoot, "Statement by Senator Reed Smoot, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance," Reed Smoot Collection, 3, [n.d.]

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>John A. Widtsoe, "Europe in the Melting Pot," Improvement Era, 21 (November 1929): 11-12.

Smoot also discounted the argument that there was a connection between the war debts and the reparations owed by Germany. "Legal or otherwise" the United States "claimed no reparations and no spoils of war."<sup>13</sup>

Though he demanded repayment of war debts from U.S. allies, Smoot was disgusted with the French attitude toward Germany and her reluctance to reduce the amount of reparations Germany owed to France. "She is demanding her pound of flesh," Smoot said, "and Germany cannot pay."<sup>14</sup> Smoot saw only selfishness and vengeance in France's attitude who, like the unjust servant of Biblical fame,<sup>15</sup> demanded mercy on the part of the creditor (the United States) and received a 53% reduction in her debts, but was unmovable regarding German reparations.

Smoot would soon lose his influence. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff had drawn stiff criticism from Democrats who claimed that it had compounded the Depression. Thus, in the 1932 election he was defeated by Senator Elbert Thomas, former Mission President to Japan.<sup>16</sup> Thomas, in support of Roosevelt, opposed the Smoot-

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<sup>13</sup>Unidentified newspaper clipping located in the Reed Smoot Collection: "Smoot Assails Debt Schemes," 6 September [ca. 1932]. Smoot, however, had introduced a bill in 1930 settling claims against Germany by the United States for repayment of monies owed in lieu of the U.S. occupation following World War I. Congressional Record-Senate 72 (27 May 1930): 9627-9634.

<sup>14</sup>"France," Deseret News, 19 August 1931.

<sup>15</sup>Matthew, 18:23-35.

<sup>16</sup>[Ronald G. Watt], 20th Century Mission Presidents Index, part II, 24, LDS Church Archives.

Hawley Tariff, and called for a removal of the foreign debts. Smoot, in contrast, supported Hoover,<sup>17</sup> and damaged his own political power by bringing himself too close to the Depression, which cost him his seat in the Senate.<sup>18</sup>

The Depression had a serious impact on the Church and its membership in Germany. In many of the larger branches which were mostly in urban areas, few members were employed,<sup>19</sup> draining the Church financially in two ways. First, the membership as a whole demanded more economic assistance, and second, the membership had a lower income overall and therefore, paid less tithes and offerings needed to support the Church in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Church members in the United States were also suffering under hard times and could not lend as much aid to the Saints in Europe as was done in the past.

John A. Widtsoe, who was European Mission President at the time, had observed the situation in Europe firsthand, and being deeply involved in welfare relief, had perhaps a more accurate understanding of the situation. He believed that unless there was an easing of the tension, people would overthrow the new

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<sup>17</sup>"U.S. Saved by Hoover Says Smoot," Salt Lake Tribune, 21 September 1932.

<sup>18</sup>Merrill writes: "All one could say is that Smoot ran along with his party. His thirty years of service, his apostleship, his reputation as one of the great leaders of American political life over many years were all apparently viewed with indifference by the voters." Merrill, 295-296.

<sup>19</sup>Ernst, 2 February 1932: 37.

<sup>20</sup>"Mission Head Home on Visit," Deseret News, 17 March 1931.

democracies in Europe replacing them with more radical governments.<sup>21</sup> Widtsoe advocated an economic approach in Europe centered on national self-sufficiency, where each nation produced as many goods as possible domestically, while importing only those items which, due to limitations of resources, could not be produced for itself. He believed that if every nation endeavored

to meet the industrial needs of its own people, the foreign markets of the past will of course largely disappear. The sooner this is realized, the sooner economic stability will be secured. The traveler in Europe, observing factories for every conceivable article arising in every country becomes convinced that the battle for possession of the markets of other nations has done much to bring about the Depression.<sup>22</sup>

Many nations, however, including Germany, England and Japan, were poor in natural resources compared to their supply of labor. Such countries needed raw materials from foreign markets to maintain their economies. In turn, they needed foreign consumers to purchase their manufactured goods. Moreover, Widtsoe's idea would have defeated the economic principle of comparative advantage where each nation produced the goods it could make most efficiently for domestic and foreign consumption, and purchased from other nations those materials it could not efficiently produce itself. He advocated the development of a European federation, (similar to today's European Economic Community) which, he contended, with its increased size could be self-

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<sup>21</sup>"European Mission Head Returns," Deseret News, 14 March 1933.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

sufficient But first, the boundaries of nationalism had to be broken down.

Nationalism, cherishing unnatural boundaries and making every man a Philistine, must be rationalized to banish war. Perhaps there will be no peace spirit in Europe, until the present false standard of loyalty to country "whether right or wrong" is forgotten.... Sooner than we think possible, the frightful sword of retribution may flash over the horizon, compelling Europe to choose between destruction or obedience to the principles which are flaming in the sky to read.<sup>23</sup>

Widtsoe taught that "War is inevitable in Europe...not because the people want it but because they believe it is sure to come."<sup>24</sup> He believed that the Versailles Treaty with its harsh penalties against Germany had brought Hitler to the political forefront because it "pushed Germany into a second rate nation and sooner or later the outbreak, putting Hitler into power, was to come."<sup>25</sup>

It was, however, Communism,<sup>26</sup> and not National Socialism which was most feared by Americans, including Mormon Church leaders. This was, in part, prompted by the Red Scare and the successes of Communism in Russia. In 1936 the Church's First

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 389.

<sup>24</sup>"Europe Demands Wealth, Equality: Mission President Explains New World Problems," Deseret News, 10 April 1931.

<sup>25</sup>"European Mission Head Returns," Deseret News, 14 November 1932.

<sup>26</sup>Even as late as 1931 an article ran in the Deseret News warning that "If conditions become too hard the youth of Germany may turn to Russia and Communism, as the youth of Italy turned to Fascism." "Germany in the Shadows," Deseret News, 16 July 1931.



Presidency ran an article warning members about the "Red Menace" which threatened American and foreign democracies.<sup>27</sup> The greatest fear was that the Depression was the seedbed upon which these radical movements could grow. The Deseret News wrote:

There is no danger to the political institutions of a country while prosperity exists and people are employed, but when distress comes and men are thrown out of work, then they begin to think of political changes....It is probable that if this continues, there will be an overthrow of the present government, and Germany will replace her democracy with some form of government that will give the people work.<sup>28</sup>

Just as during the inflation of 1923, Church leaders believed that the Depression was turning the hearts of Germans toward religion. "The greatest cry in Europe is not for bread, but understanding," said Widtsoe, "Man is turning his attention to the questions, Whence did I come? Why am I here? and Where am I going?"<sup>29</sup>

While a few turned to religion for answers, most looked to political leaders to solve their problems. In Germany the greatest beneficiary of the German quest for answers was Adolf Hitler. In 1931 the Church ran an article about Hitler in the Improvement Era, evaluating his personal and political technique.

<sup>27</sup>"Warning to Church Members," Improvement Era 39 (August 1936): 488, and Deseret News, 3 July 1936.

<sup>28</sup>"Political Danger of Unemployment," Deseret News, 19 May 1931.

<sup>29</sup>"Europe Needs Religion Says Prest. Widtsoe," Deseret News, 23 March 1931.

The author, Wendell C. Irvine, heard Hitler speak at a Nazi rally, confessing that he too

succumbed to his magic, fell under the spell of his wand, and felt almost forced to agree with [his] neighbor in saying that a new and brighter star had appeared in the political constellation of the world.<sup>30</sup>

Only after Irvine had returned to his hotel room and was given time to "think reasonably" did he evaluate Hitler in his true perspective.

I...concluded that Adolf Hitler wasn't a great Bismarck after all, that the content of his speech that afternoon was inclined to border on radicalism, and that his speech was greatly enhanced by the ideal conditions under which he spoke.<sup>31</sup>

Irvine saw that Hitler appealed to those most hungry, [and least informed] and commented that it was the economic circumstances, coupled with his promises of prosperity, that made Hitler a success. "It is a house founded on depression and hard times, a house that the first wind of prosperity will topple over."<sup>32</sup> Of course, Irvine would be wrong in one respect. Hitler had by the mid-1930s been able to take credit for the economic recovery in Germany and had fully entrenched himself as dictator. Furthermore, no one foresaw the terror Hitler would create by his police state which insured his power even in the final days of the Second World War. Many believed, as did the Deseret News,

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<sup>30</sup>Wendell C. Irvine, "Adolf Hitler, The Man and His Ideas," Improvement Era 23 (November, 1931): 13.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 55.

that if he came to power he would "probably put into effect none of these revolutionary doctrines."<sup>33</sup> Most were convinced that public opinion and the Weimar Republic's constitutional restraints would keep him in check. They also believed that the other alternatives, particularly Communism, posed the greater threat and that Hitler could most likely be controlled by less radical and more experienced leaders who surrounded him.<sup>34</sup> They misjudged the extent to which the Weimar Constitution and the German polity could be manipulated.

Young Mormons, including American missionaries, were often mesmerized by Hitler.<sup>35</sup> They were impressed that Hitler espoused some of the more unique teachings of the Church.<sup>36</sup> He did not smoke or drink, and instituted a fast day where the money saved from fasting helped the poor.<sup>37</sup> The Millennial Star commented:

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<sup>33</sup>"Call to Hitler," Deseret News, 21 November 1932.

<sup>34</sup>Christine King, The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity, (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1982), 68.

<sup>35</sup>A report on the Church's Primary organization concluded: "There has been just a little decrease in the enrollment and attendance of children, especially the boys, on account of this new Hitler movement here in Germany. As yet it has not affected the organization greatly." Primary Association, Report of Auxiliary Work in the Mission Field, 2, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>36</sup>Russon comments regarding the youth: "I don't think they as a general rule were critical of Hitler nearly as much as their parents and grandparents. They [the parents and grandparents] were the ones who were most concerned." Russon, 6.

<sup>37</sup>"All Germany Will Fast," Millennial Star 95 (28 September 1933): 638.

"It is indeed singular that a comparison of the details of the two systems of organized fasting shows them to be so nearly identical."<sup>38</sup> A few believed that Hitler got some of these ideas from the Church since the fast day was introduced shortly after Nazi officials had confiscated some LDS literature.<sup>39</sup> High-ranking Nazis had also been given Mormon literature,<sup>40</sup> and rumors circulated that Hitler had read the Book of Mormon.<sup>41</sup> One former missionary believed that he had encountered and preached to Hitler in 1927, concluding that this had helped soften the Nazi attitude toward Mormons.<sup>42</sup> Whether these claims are true shall perhaps never be proven, but many Mormons liked to believe that they were having some influence on the inner circles of government.

Mormons were also pleased with Hitler's attempts to institute what they perceived to be a higher morality within Germany. Prostitutes and homosexuals were arrested, and many of the decadent cabarets, for which Weimar Berlin was famous, were closed or closely monitored. Nazis and Mormons held common beliefs about the importance of marriage and of raising large families, as well as the need to trace one's genealogy. Their

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Russon, 6.

<sup>40</sup>King, 70.

<sup>41</sup>Scharffs, 110.

<sup>42</sup>Morris and Rosamond Butterfield, interview by Melvin L. Bashore, 18 July 1985, 3-5, LDS Church Archives.

motives, however, were deeply divergent. Mormons wanted large families to build the kingdom of God, while the National Socialists sought to enlarge and strengthen their Aryan kingdom. Nazis did genealogy to prove their non-Jewish heritage while Mormons traced their family roots to redeem their kindred dead.<sup>43</sup> Even the Nazi attitude toward prostitution and homosexuality seems to have been motivated more to cleanse the Aryan race than to improve popular morality.

Just as others in America, Mormon missionaries often refused to believe what they thought were exaggerated stories about the Nazis.

This week we witnessed the boycott of the Nationalrat<sup>44</sup> against Jews caused by the circulation of untruths in foreign countries that the political prisoners here in Germany were being inhumanely mistreated [sic]. Jews in England, America and other countries started boycotting German made goods so the Nazis called a boycott of Jewish stores here in Germany.<sup>45</sup>

It should always be remembered that the true motives behind Nazi actions were not always evident, and many doctrines, like their intentions regarding Jews, were not evident to most of

<sup>43</sup>In 1934 articles ran in the Deseret News relating to the genealogy work which was being done in Germany calling it a "fulfillment of prophecy." "The Hearts of the Children," Deseret News, 17 February, 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, March, 7 April 1934.

<sup>44</sup>Ross is likely referring to events following the Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933. Hitler used the fire and other unrest associated with it to induce Hindenburg and the Reichstag to declare a state of emergency laying ultimate power in the hands of the Chancellor (Hitler).

<sup>45</sup>Charles J. Ross, Journal, 28 March to 3 April 1933, LDS Church Archives.

the world until after the end of the Second World War. It is therefore most important when judging these supporters of Nazism to see them from their 1930s perspective when the entire Nazi demon had not fully manifest itself.

Most members of the Church in Germany, however, remained apolitical, though there were a few who became involved in the Nazi party. At least one branch suspected that one of its members was working with the local police against the Church, and that member was eventually excommunicated.<sup>46</sup> Most Mormons who became deeply entrenched in Nazi party politics became so involved that they had little time for Church activity, or they became so alienated from the Church that they had their membership terminated. Close ties with a religion, particularly one viewed by many Germans to be as radical as Mormonism, meant that one's upward mobility within the Nazi party would be severely limited. At least a dozen party members were excommunicated by Francis Salzner in 1934.<sup>47</sup>

It is evident that though some missionaries may have been somewhat enamored of Hitler and some attempted to find similarities between Nazism and the Church, these similarities

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<sup>46</sup>Hugo Fritz Dietrich, Family History, 61, LDS Church Archives.

<sup>47</sup>Richard Owen. Interview conducted by Douglas Tobler, 28 May 1987, and quoted in Douglas F. Tobler, "The Kingdom and the Reichs: The Relationship Between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and German Governments, 1850-1945, unpublished paper, [n.d.]

were at best superficial, as is evidenced by those who could not be both Mormons and Nazis at the same time.

Primarily, German-Mormons, like other Germans, feared what this capricious government might do to them and their religion. Some Nazi harassment of Mormons occurred, but these were isolated incidents, and were mostly limited to such things as the abolition of the Boy Scouts because they competed with the Hitler Youth, and the closure of Church meetings during Nazi rallies. But such action applied to any organization--religious or secular. Though there was no official Nazi policy toward Mormonism, evidence indicates that a roundup of Mormons en masse as was done with Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and others may have been in the Nazi plan, though probably not focused directly against Mormonism, but against religion in general. Many priests were arrested and sent to camps for opposing the regime. At least some Nazis had toyed with the idea of establishing an Aryan Church founded in Teutonic traditions mixed with Christian doctrine. But these movements which did not have official approval were distrusted by the regime.<sup>48</sup>

Though Hitler could ill afford to arrest all Lutherans and Catholics, since this would involve most of the population, he did, and would likely have continued to arrest members of smaller religious factions, who, unlike the predominant faiths, had little power against him. One Mormon official, Otto Berndt, when questioned by police in Hamburg, was informed by a Nazi officer

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<sup>48</sup>King, 3.

that "When we have this war behind us, when we have the time to devote to it and after we have eliminated the Jews, you Mormons are next!"<sup>49</sup> If this statement truly represented the policy of the Third Reich and not the opinion of one local official, then perhaps Mormons could be found somewhere on the hierarchy of enemies of the Reich, albeit perhaps among the lesser enemies. What put Mormons more toward the bottom of the list and religions like Jehovah's Witnesses closer to the top were their attitudes toward nations as a whole. Mormons, under the Twelfth Article of Faith supported, or at least did not oppose the regime and thus were treated more favorably. Jehovah's Witnesses, unlike Mormons, refused to pay homage to any government, and refused to serve in the German military. Hence, they found themselves near the top of the list of dissidents and undesirables.

Mormons and some other religious groups feared being moved nearer the top of the list because of doctrines which tied them to Judaism. Most of these religions believed in the Old Testament, which because of its "jewishness" could be construed

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<sup>49</sup>Interview with Otto Berndt, cited in Douglas Tobler, and Alan Keele, "The Führer's New Clothes," Sunstone, 5 (November-December, 1980): 24. The United States State Department also had similar fears. Speaking of Mormon Missionaries, an American Consul wrote to the Secretary of State: "The presence of these missionaries may cause irritation among Germans. Hence the attitude of German officials towards religious proselyting might be discreetly conveyed to representatives of the Church of the Latter Day Saints [sic] in case the department deems this advisable." American Consulate to the Secretary of State, State Department, 20 June 1933.



as subversive.<sup>50</sup> Nazis in an attempt to modify Christianity to their liking argued that:

Jesus was the true Aryan who had founded "positive Christianity," which was corrupted by the "Rabbi Paul" who as a "political Jew" judaized Christ's noble and heroic Aryan ideals.<sup>51</sup>

Mormons, who take a special interest in Judaism and profess beliefs about the gathering of the Jews in the last days, had sound reasons to fear reprisals from Nazis. Though it appears that these beliefs were seldom denied, they were not emphasized in Germany throughout the Nazi era.

It appears that for the vast majority of Mormons the primary goal was to endure the Reich until it no longer threatened them. Mormons believed that the Kingdom of God was eternal, and the Thousand Year Reich, even if it truly did last one thousand years, as Hitler predicted, would not outlast the reign of God. Therefore, if they put up with the inconvenience it was hoped that this too would pass and something more to their liking would take its place. James E. Talmage, upon reading of book burnings in the New Nazi state wrote: "If the regrettable act is expressive of the German mind and spirit--which is to be greatly doubted--it is an evidence suggestive of an impending fall of the German nation."<sup>52</sup> He was right, but it took a world

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<sup>50</sup>King, 5.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Talmage, Journal, 17 May 1933.

war and the lives of uncounted millions before his fears were realized.