

AUTHOR**John V. Bowlus**

Lecturer, Researcher
Kadir Has University Center
for Energy and Sustainable
Development
Twitter: @johnvowlus

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Oil and the Great Powers: Britain and Germany, 1914 to 1945 (Anand Toprani, 2019)

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Anand Toprani's, *Oil and the Great Powers: Britain and
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Abstract

Anand Toprani's *Oil and the Great Powers: Britain and
Germany, 1914 to 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2019)
describes how the failure of Britain and Germany to secure
oil supplies undermined each country's hegemonic ambi-
tions over three decades. Leveraging archival records and the
model of comparative history, Toprani pens a work replete
with insights for historians of energy and geopolitics.

Plan of the article

- Comparative human narratives
- Geography and the pivotal year of 1935
- Germany's search for self-sufficiency
- Energy transitions and world power

1 For the past two hundred years, dominance of fossil fuel resources has bestowed global power. Britain became the world's first global hegemon in the nineteenth century, thanks to its first-mover advantage in industrialization and its peerless navy, neither of which would have been possible without the world's largest supply of high-quality domestic coal resources. The United States similarly leveraged its own prodigious oil resources in the twentieth century into dollar primacy, industrial strength, and military power, and then embraced global hegemony. Sandwiched between these epochs, Britain and Germany fought two world wars for global hegemony in which neither side had enough oil resources to win and after which both sides emerged weaker.

2 This is the subject of Anand Toprani's excellent new history, *Oil and the Great Powers: Britain and Germany, 1914 to 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2019), winner of the 2020 Richard W. Leopold Prize from the Organization of American Historians, which is awarded every two years. The work narrates how the British and German failure to secure oil supplies undermined each country's hegemonic ambitions over three decades. "Britain and Germany drew the same lessons from [World War I] with regard to oil. Not only did they need it, and in much greater quantities than heretofore, but they had to look for it beyond their borders" (6). Britain sought oil independence through investments in the Middle East in the interwar period. Germany's options were limited to its synthetic fuel industry and land-based sources linked by rail and barge, namely Romania and the Soviet Union.

3 Toprani, currently an Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College in Rhode Island, argues that the powers erred by seeking independence in oil in the first place: "energy independence is not synonymous with energy security" (16). They might have attained energy security, however, if they had chosen to be interdependent, something neither was politically willing to consider. "Opting for energy security as part of a strategy of interdependence could have provided Britain and Germany with

ample supplies of energy and perhaps guaranteed their economic prosperity, but only at the cost of their political freedom. This was unacceptable to elites in either country" (17-8).

We now know how elusive energy independence is, but this was less clear in the 1920s and 1930s, when oil was flooding onto the market, creating demand with low prices, and supplanting coal in the transportation sector.¹ Britain's quest for oil independence is somewhat forgivable, given its past independence in coal and growing demand for oil. Germany, on the other hand, started from behind, tried to rewrite the rules of the game, and nearly succeeded. For both powers, however, the reality of logistics, planning, prices in currencies they didn't control, sources located in lands across oceans, and geopolitics made independence a pipe dream.

COMPARATIVE HUMAN NARRATIVES

Oil and the Great Powers is a vital contribution to the historiography of oil and world power and will provide readers with new sources and insights to spur their own work, especially concerning these three decades, but also for broader questions pertaining to energy geopolitics. Scholars have made vital contributions to explaining how oil revolutionized warfare in World War I,² how powers sought concessions in the Middle East in the interwar period,³ and how oil shaped World War II in Europe and helped trigger it in the Pacific.⁴ But no one has examined the British-German stories concurrently and in such holistic fashion, thus providing a complete narrative of how oil helped produce the cataclysm of World

1 Nuno Luís Madureira, "Oil in the Age of Steam", *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, n° 1, 2010.

2 Walter Jensen, "The Importance of Energy in the First and Second World Wars", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 11, n° 3, 1968.

3 Gareth Jones, "The British Government and the Oil Companies, 1912-1924: the Search for an Oil Policy", *The Historical Journal*, vol. 20, n° 3, 1977; and William Stivers, "International Politics and Iraqi Oil, 1918-1928: a Study in Anglo-American Diplomacy", *Business History Review*, vol. 55, n° 4, 1981.

4 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: the Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

War II. This book, quite frankly, should have been written decades sooner, but required the right scholar, one capable of using both English and German-language archival and secondary sources and well-versed in oil, geopolitics, history, and strategy, to take it on.

- 6 Toprani's account is especially powerful in two methodological respects. First and foremost, he uses archival records to reveal how powerful individuals, including Adolf Hitler himself, shaped oil policy. Interdepartmental debates can often dull readers, but Toprani locks in on the relevant debates and demonstrates how leaders pushed and pulled on policy. Whitehall's interdepartmental squabbles were particularly fascinating, and the tradeoffs argued between the Treasury, the Admiralty, the Petroleum Department, Foreign Office, and Colonial Office reveal how intertwined and complicated British policy was, which proved, at times, detrimental to British strategy.
- 7 It is these human-driven decision-making narratives that lend the book's comparative approach – covering Britain over four chapters in Part I and then Germany over four chapters in Part II – such resonance. This comparative approach works so well because it distills the two different strategies on their own merits. "Although there is some overlap in chronology and policy aims, the strategies adopted by Britain and Germany were as different as the reasons for their failure" (19). Planning, logistics, and timing all undid the plans of the powers for oil independence, but in different ways. The book's comparative approach should be considered a model for future histories of energy that involve two or, at most, three nations.

GEOGRAPHY AND THE PIVOTAL YEAR OF 1935

- 8 Part I traces Britain's attempts to stockpile oil and acquire new foreign concessions. Indebted to the Americans and forced to pay for much of its oil in dollars, Britain started the interwar era in a precarious position. Its large bet on the Middle East – Iran and Iraq – was not unwarranted: prodigious supplies came online in both countries. Yet Britain could not count on Middle

East supplies to Europe in wartime given both the shortage of tankers and long journey required. Resource nationalism, meanwhile, imperiled its most readily available, non-U.S. source of oil in the Western Hemisphere: Mexico. "Britain's failure had less to do with geology than geography," writes Toprani, because the British "based their oil strategy on the premise that there would not be any threat to their supply lines" (119).

The story's definitive turning point—and one I didn't see coming—arrives in 1935. "Germany's abrogation of the Versailles Treaty and the fracturing of Britain's relationship with Italy over its invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 changed the strategic calculus. Germany and Italy, although inferior to Britain at sea, could sever access to the Middle East through the Mediterranean—through which 34 percent of Britain's oil imports traveled in 1934—and possibly even invade the region" (97). Britain's lines of communication to oil supplies in the Middle East, on which it placed its bet for oil security, were now threatened, and it did not have enough tankers to avoid the Suez Canal and bring the oil around Africa. A Mediterranean disruption, in other words, could sever Britain from its Middle East supplies, according to planners. "Seldom," Toprani concludes, "has a strategy promised so much yet yielded so little as Britain's efforts in the Middle East following World War I" (129). Britain suffered a further blow in 1938, when Mexico nationalized its oil industry, where British firms were dominant (108–113). Thus, on the eve of war in 1939, Britain found itself in a similar position as in 1914: largely dependent on the United States for oil supplies.

On the Mediterranean threat, I wondered if Toprani missed an opportunity to examine the 1936 Montreux Convention, which gave Turkey control over regulating the Turkish Straits and created uncertainty regarding the Soviets' most critical oil-export chokepoint. The Soviets protested the convention in 1939 and 1940, and later in 1945, seeking air and naval bases to assure their position in the straits. We learn that Axis oil supplies, both German and Italian, from Romania and the Soviet Union had to travel overland

from 1939–1941, which was more expensive and logistically demanding. Did the convention and Turkey’s pro-Allied attitude also play a role in this story by hampering the Axis powers in the Mediterranean?

GERMANY’S SEARCH FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

11 The story of Britain is thorough and original, but the story of Germany is even more so, partly because the stakes and gambles were more dramatic. The Germans had learned in World War I that they had to secure oil supplies if they were to unseat the British, but they faced similar constraints as before. Without a dominant navy and already a continental power, Germany looked to new imports from nearby countries – Romania in 1938 and the Soviet Union in 1939 – and to grow its own synthetic fuel industry, which had the added benefit of aiding foreign currency balances by reducing German dependence on foreign imports of fuel (177). Germany’s attempts to thread a tight needle on oil foundered on two mistakes. The first was Hitler’s impatience. With Italy’s resurgence and the victory of fascist forces in Spain, Hitler believed the geopolitical chessboard was titling in his favor and pushed for his plans of conquest earlier than Germany was logistically ready, at least in oil. Germany’s second mistake was not planning for how to supply Europe after it conquered it (199). Despite these shortcomings, Germany, partly through luck but also through adaptation, supplied its own armed forces ably during the war, at least until the spring of 1941.

12 By the summer of 1941, however, Germany’s oil situation was dire. Desperate to correct its coming oil imbalance, it had established Continental Oil in March 1941 to try to free Germany from the control of the Anglo-American companies in Romania, but this half-measure would not be enough, nor were increased investments in synthetic fuels viable given wartime exigencies. Thus, Hitler crossed the Rubicon and invaded the Soviet Union with Operation Barbarossa, something he had begun planning in July 1940. After securing the oil fields in Baku, Germany’s strategy was to move into the

Mediterranean, severing Allied access to Soviet and Middle East oil altogether and opening it up for the Germans (231–37). Its failure, of course, was a major turning point in the war and dashed Germany’s search for self-sufficiency in oil, the subject of the final chapter of Part II.

ENERGY TRANSITIONS AND WORLD POWER

The undercurrent of Toprani’s twin narratives is the global transition from coal to oil as the most-used energy source. Britain was the first power to recognize and invest in oil as a transportation fuel for naval advantage, starting its conversion of destroyers and submarines in 1901 and of battleships in 1912. The United States only partially converted its fleet during this period, while Germany started during World War I, but the British made a willful head start in a bid to retain global hegemony.⁵ Though the outcome was determined on land, British control of seas kept the German navy at bay and restricted imports into the country. A similar scenario occurred during World War II, as British control of the Atlantic enabled it to import ample supplies of oil from the United States – and then military hardware through Lend Lease from 1941 and troops from 1942. In the end, planning, logistics, and strategic enclosure by the Allies turned the tide in both conflicts.

Oil and the Great Powers made me think that a comparative study of the United States and the Soviet Union could be similarly fascinating. Both countries owe their global power to oil to an extent, and it seems that they discovered how best to coerce their enemies with oil in the same year: 1941. The Soviets made the obvious decision to sever oil exports to Germany after Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa in June 1941. Did this decision, and Operation Barbarossa more broadly, inform the United States’ decision to embargo oil exports to Japan in July/August 1941? The United States and the Soviet Union could also be an interesting pairing along

⁵ Volkan Ediger, John Bowlus, “A Farewell to King Coal: Geopolitics, Energy Security, and the Transition to Oil, 1898–1917”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 62, n° 2, 2019.

the lines of Toprani's model, for instance from 1941-1970 as they competed globally while each having ample oil supplies, although access to Soviet archives would make this challenging. Alternatively, the two powers have dabbled in interdependence and cooperation in oil from 1991-2020, with United States companies seeking oil deals in Russia and both aiming to extend oil's primary position in the global energy system.

- 15 Control over energy resources continues to shape geopolitics today. All powers still depend on oil for the military transportation sector, but

the energy transition demands cleaner fuels, and some fear that China's dominance over the minerals required to construct renewable energy technologies, batteries most notably, could be a future geopolitical flashpoint. *Oil and the Great Powers* reminds us both that transitions in energy sources change geopolitics and that these shifts take decades to occur. There are no quick solutions, and energy independence remains as elusive today as it did for Britain and Germany. Interdependence remains the only path towards energy security.

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