

History's Harsh Lessons



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What the complexities of the Second World War teach us about the prospect of another global conflict.

The Second World War in many ways shaped the world we live in. It sealed the fate of the British Empire. It saw the rise of the United States, and then the Soviet Union, to super-power status, precipitating an age of nuclear confrontation that, even years after the end of the Cold War, is still a source of anxiety and conflict. It spurred a movement towards European union. In the Far East, with the defeat of the Japanese, it paved the way for the rise of modern China and embedded its distrust of the West. It also gave birth to the United Nations, which, for all its arguable effectiveness, was inspired by a belief in the possibility of a better world.

Now, in the midst of alarming global instability – social, political, and economic – it is understandable that people look again at the Second World War as a cautionary tale, one that can alert us to danger signals and perhaps offer useful signposts towards a more peaceful future. That, at least, is the optimistic viewpoint. Others might argue that we've learned little from history's greatest human tragedy and are blindly headed towards another global conflict.

If it's any comfort, I'm convinced that history never repeats itself. Nothing in human affairs is inevitable. Yet, I do believe we need to understand the past to make better sense of what's happening around us now. And we must avoid the temptation to generalize or draw bogus parallels. The Second World War was a complex business and our understanding of it must be equally nuanced.

We tend, for example, to reduce the war to a battle among major powers. More accurately, it was a conglomeration of conflicts. Some were Great Power conflicts. All, to a certain degree, were influenced by what you could characterize as an international civil war between the polarized extremes of communism and fascism, or communism and Nazism.



The sheer brutality of the Second World War, a war in which civilians suffered more than uniformed combatants, can only be understood in terms of the process of ideologically fueled dehumanization that preceded it – nationalism, stirred to a fever pitch by totalitarian regimes extolling racism as a virtue. The rise of those totalitarian regimes was itself a function of popular discontent, fomented by grim economic conditions, high levels of unemployment, and a sense of hopelessness.

Despite the similarities with the world today, it's unlikely that we're heading towards another conflict of global scale. Europe, in any case essentially demilitarized, is not going to erupt into armed conflict, however much debtor countries unhelpfully try to vilify prosperous Germany by evoking memories of its Nazi past.

Where events in Europe might play out badly is in Asia, where the knock-on effect in China is potentially huge. The Chinese leadership is terrified of any form of internal unrest. The internal contradictions of the regime have been sustainable in a period of rapid economic growth, but if that growth were halted, the easiest diversionary tactic would be external aggression. It explains why the United States is deploying 60 percent of its naval resources to the Pacific. General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, has openly stated that he's deeply concerned about developments in the Far East.

The other areas of dangerous volatility are North Africa and the Middle East. There, we see a disturbing brew of colliding ideologies – political and religious – combined with rapid population growth, economic stagnation, and high rates of youth unemployment. The resulting magma of anger, frustration, and impatience could easily erupt into violence, particularly if manipulated by external powers intent on fighting proxy wars to secure favorable access to the region's oil.

Perhaps the Second World War's most important lesson is a moral one. Even in the midst of the most horrifying conditions, on all sides, there were those who never let go of their fundamental belief in humanity. Their example is something worth upholding as we struggle to resolve the profoundly disturbing challenges and potential conflicts of the world today.

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