

## Should World War I Have Been Fought?

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All wars should be avoided. They usually break out through a loss of deterrence in the face of aggression. Yet few today question whether World War II should have been waged despite the huge losses in human life—some sixty million dead—that eventually proved necessary to eradicate German Nazism, Italian fascism, and Japanese militarism.

There has been little serious revisionism about the costs of the Second World War (as it is known in the Anglosphere) because the utter defeat of the Axis powers and the occupation of their devastated countries led to some seventy-five years of relative peace without another global war. In part, the uniquely savage nature of the Axis ideologies, the Holocaust, the twenty-seven million dead in Russia, and the fifteen million killed in China made it clear that by late 1941 there was little alternative to stopping the nihilistic agendas of Germany, Italy, and Japan other than by armed force.

Yet the costs versus the benefits of World War I—during which between fifteen and twenty million perished in combat and from war-related causes, and which never was as commensurately global or saw such huge civilian casualties—remain controversial. The 1914–1918 “war to end all wars” is now far more likely to be interpreted as futile, given the subsequent failure of the Versailles Treaty and the outbreak of a far deadlier, subsequent world war a mere two decades later. (In large part the flawed armistice was due to the inability of the victors at Versailles to adopt a postwar occupational and reconstruction program analogous to that of 1945: weakness and shrillness

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led to more war, in a way unapologetic strength combined with magnanimity after WWII did not.)

Consequently, World War I is more often judged as something that could, and should, have been avoided, given that Imperial Germany of 1914 is regarded as traditionally militaristic rather than as nightmarishly murderous in the fashion of the Third Reich. Germany's wartime allies among the Central Powers, Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey, were neither as ambitious nor as cruel as either Mussolini's Italy or Imperial Japan under its cabal of generals.

Today, a century after America's entry into World War I, that conflict is often described as a tragic miscalculation or intramural feud among European familial nations that purportedly shared roughly the same assumptions about limited parliamentary government and the rule of the aristocracy. These affinities were accepted both by the more authoritarian leaders of Germany and by the socialist French and democratic British politicians.

The actual or symbolic supreme commanders of three of the most powerful belligerents—King George V of Britain, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia—were related (George V was a first cousin to both the Kaiser and the Tsar, who in turn were third cousins) and almost identical in appearance and dress. With the exception of the Ottomans, all major powers had prayed to the same God. All claimed the same shared European past. Only within those common parameters would individual national character and ethnic pride in one's history galvanize one side or the other to greater effort.

Yet was World War I really a march of folly that served no purpose, and were the agendas of the Central Powers really all that antithetical to what followed in the 1930s? In other words, would it truly not have mattered if the U.S. had not belatedly entered the war in April 1917 to revive France and Britain—or if Germany and its allies had simply won World War I outright over a solitary France?

Some counterfactuals assume a rather benign German victory or, more dramatically, even a preferable outcome. In such a scenario, a victorious Germany under a confident Kaiser supposedly would not have been followed by anyone like Hitler, or anything like World War II and the Holocaust. Either an isolationist and noninterventionist—or defeated—America would have been checked, and not have assumed a dubious role as global enforcer. There would have been supposedly no Soviet Union, since defeated and occupied Russia was reconfigured under the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918, losing a quarter of its population and 300,000 square miles of territory, which would never have been revoked, or perhaps predated by something similar.

Without an Allied victory, there would have also been no Versailles and thus supposedly less chance for a subsequent economic depression and accompanying rise of European fascist movements that the treaty purportedly engendered. Either a noninterventionist or even defeated Britain would have returned to its eighteenth-century role of an island sea power, but without much continental influence. With victory in World War I, Germany and its allies would have implemented a sort of proto-European Union, although a tad more brutal and coercive than the twentieth-century intrusive Brussels accords. Germany would have absorbed much of Western and Eastern Europe in a *de facto* pan-German land empire from Kiev to the Atlantic, and from Tallin to Marseilles.

Yet such a huge Prussian-German conglomerate would not have been premised on democratic or even British imperial principles. The German Army had shown in both Belgium and Russia a remarkable propensity for brutality and savagery against civilians. As for Bismarck's much touted social welfare state, it had been designed at least in part to alleviate class tensions by uniting workers through shared nationalist zeal—and in some sense presaged the original labor tenets of National Socialism.

The Imperial German Navy, unlike the Nazi Kriegsmarine, was nearly a prewar match for the British fleet, and under any victorious scenario would have enjoyed a pan-European naval advantage over an overwhelmed Royal Navy. Most of the greatest field marshals in Hitler's Wehrmacht—Hans Guderian, Walter Model, Erwin Rommel, Gerd von Rundstedt—were decorated World War I veterans. Their zeal for German hegemony both preceded and transcended National Socialism. And their regrets about World War I were not that it was fought, or proved too costly, but only that it was lost when it should have been won.

Indeed, had Germany won World War I, there would likely have been nationalist exhilaration and even greater aggrandizement rather than something akin to the melancholy that settled in among the victorious Allies and was so starkly voiced by British poets Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and American poet Alan Seeger. Certainly, it would be hard to imagine anything analogous in a postwar victorious Germany to the "King and Country" Oxford Union debate of 1933, in which postmodern British students pledged that they would "in no circumstances fight for its King and Country."

Under whatever counterfactual scenarios one wishes to employ—the Central Powers eventually defeat the Allies, or Britain and the United States allow France in 1914 to fall quickly to Germany, or America stays out of the war and allows Britain and France to lose in 1917—the result is about the

same: a pancontinental German imperialism unchecked and undeterred by any European or New World Power.

Prussian culture, which was dismantled in 1945, would have flourished as never before, and with it the values that had led Germany to invade France twice, in 1870 and 1914. The Kaiser certainly was not Hitler, but there were plenty of Germanic strains in Hitler's thinking that predated World War I, whether the Tacitean romance of a unique, racially pure Germanic Volk beyond the Danube and Rhine and thus untainted by Roman multiracialism, or a Nietzschean notion of natural supermen enjoying their God-given rights over "men without chests" in a system where natural right has prevailed over artificially constructed equality.

German historian Oswald Spengler finished his first draft of the *Decline of the West* by 1914—before the outbreak of World War I. His emphases on race, culture, and the need for spiritual cleansing from the decadence of Western civilization reflected common contemporary German spins on racial Darwinism in the work of Friedrich Ratzel and Ernst Haeckel. Ideas about Aryans, *Kulturkampf*, *Lebensraum*, and *Untermenschen* predated—and fed—both World War I and National Socialism. More concretely, the German *Lebensraum* plans of postwar annexations in both the west and the east—as evidenced respectively in the tentative *Septemberprogramm* of 1914 for a supposedly vanquished France and Belgium, and the later 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with a defeated Russia—foreshadowed Hitler's own territorial ambitions.

In sum, World War I was a tragedy that might have been avoided with greater Allied solidarity and prewar deterrence. But after it began in August 1914, an Allied victory—due to French indomitability, Russian sacrifices, a British expeditionary army, and the belated entry of the United States—was far preferable to a Germanized Europe. Hitler was energized by the loss of World War I, but he was also fueled by far more than the shame of defeat. If his nightmarish agendas would not have resonated as much in a victorious, confident, and globally imperial postwar Germany of the Kaisers, it likely would have been because a kindred pancontinental imperialism had made them somewhat redundant.