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Was the “Good War” Unnecessary? Part 1

by Anthony Gregory

[Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World](#) by Patrick J. Buchanan (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008); 518 pages.

Of all the wars the United States has fought, World War II is the most universally celebrated. It was the “Good War,” despite being the bloodiest in world history. Only in the Civil War did more Americans perish. But World War II is seen as the best example of the nation mobilizing completely and righteously to combat evil itself.

In Britain and America, many consider Winston Churchill the greatest Englishman ever, perhaps the Man of the 20th Century, because he pushed for war against the Nazi regime when others favored appeasement. In America, Churchill’s belligerent foresight, in stark contrast to the “isolationist” Americans who wanted to avoid war, is treated as a lesson about the limits of nonintervention and the need sometimes to wage war, sometimes ruthlessly, sometimes before national interests are directly threatened. Had Adolf Hitler not been defeated, civilization throughout Europe and perhaps more of the world would have expired. Had Britain and the United States not been bold, Hitler would not have been defeated.

World War II acclimated the American Left to foreign interventionism. Eventually, the Left got an anti-war reputation by turning sour on the Cold War. But initially, among leftists it was mostly communists who strongly opposed the Cold War as inaugurated by Democrat Harry Truman when the dust was still settling from the war against the Axis Powers, a war they had backed once Hitler and Stalin had their falling out. Democrats today point to World War II as a just war, as the pinnacle of American power used properly to secure human rights abroad. Bill Clinton invoked the specter of Hitler when waging war on Serbia, although Slobodan Milosevic’s crimes, while severe, paled in comparison with those of the Nazis.

On the Right, the Second World War is similarly popular, and there is precious little remorse about the crimes committed by the U.S. government, from bombing civilians abroad to interning them at home. Franklin Roosevelt, who foisted upon America the most collectivist

economy America had ever seen at peacetime, will remain a hero among conservatives as long as he is perceived as one of the greatest commanders in chief in U.S. history.

The narrative that Hitler was defeated because Churchill's resolute belligerence won out over Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's acquiescence to Hitler — and, from a U.S. perspective, because the American isolationists lost the day — has become a staple neoconservative talking point. Capitulating to Saddam Hussein or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be reliving 1938, when Chamberlain sold out Czechoslovakia at Munich. (Paradoxically, Hitler is both an unparalleled evil and the equivalent of every foreign dictator the U.S. faces today.)

Does this narrative give the whole picture? Some American historians have argued that the United States could have avoided the war and it would have been better for America and, on balance, no worse for the world. In *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War*, Patrick Buchanan goes further and argues Britain could have stayed out and spared much of Europe from the war's reaches. Tens of millions of lives would have been spared. The Germans and Russians would very likely have met on the battlefield, but the Holocaust could have been avoided and Stalin's empire might have never grown to enslave half the continent.

Britain would have retained its empire. As with all empires, Buchanan believes, "the fall of the British Empire was inevitable." However, "the suddenness and sweep of the collapse were not. There is a world of difference between watching a great lady grandly descend a staircase and seeing a slattern being kicked down a flight of stairs."

The not-so-great war

Buchanan traces Britain's participation in World War II back to the origins of World War I. Calling the two conflicts "The Great Civil War of the West," Buchanan argues that had not World War I occurred and concluded the way it did, there would have been no World War II. Indeed, World War I "destroyed the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires and ushered onto the world stage Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler."

This thesis is not unique but Buchanan's treatment of World War I is particularly worth reading. Watching diplomatic bungling transform a border dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia into a bloodbath that killed 20 million and produced nothing good made a generation hate and distrust war. The popular interpretation of the Second World War has unfortunately obscured this lesson in peace.

Buchanan summarizes the diplomatic tragedy:

Had the Austrians not sought to exploit the assassination of Ferdinand to crush Serbia, they would have taken Serbia's acceptance of nine of their ten demands as vindication. Had Czar Nicholas II been more forceful in rescinding his order for full mobilization, Germany would not have mobilized, and the Schlieffen Plan would

not have begun automatically to unfold. Had the Kaiser and [Chancellor Theobald von] Bethmann realized the gravity of the crisis, just days earlier, they might have seized on [Sir Edward] Grey's proposal to reconvene the six-power conference that resolved the 1913 Balkan crisis.

Allied propaganda at the time put all blame on Prussian militarism. Hawkish Allies felt vindicated when Germany invaded Belgium, although Britain had secretly planned to invade had Germany not done so. Were the Germans particularly militaristic? As Buchanan points out, in the century before World War I Germany and Austria had been in three wars, compared with France's five, Russia's seven, and Britain's ten.

Buchanan's thesis on World War I: Germany was far from faultless, but it was Britain that bears most responsibility for turning the war into a world war and laying the groundwork for another world war:

For it was the British decision to send an army across the Channel to fight in Western Europe, for the first time in exactly one hundred years, that led to the defeat of the Schlieffen Plan, four years of trench warfare, America's entry, Germany's collapse in the autumn of 1918, the abdication of the Kaiser, the dismemberment of Germany at Versailles, and the rise to power of a veteran of the Western Front who, four years after the war's end, was unreconciled to his nation's defeat. "It cannot be that two million Germans should have fallen in vain," cried Adolf Hitler in 1922. "No, we do not pardon, we demand — vengeance."

Suffering under Britain's starvation blockade, which had claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and continued long after the Armistice, Berlin capitulated to the strict conditions of Versailles. "Germany faced invasion and death by starvation if she refused." The victors carved up much of the world, and not only to Germany's detriment. Hungary was

reduced from an imperial domain of 125,000 square miles to a landlocked nation of 36,000. Transylvania and the two million Hungarians residing there went to Romania as a reward for joining the Allies. Slovakia, which a predominantly Catholic Hungary had ruled for centuries, was handed over to the Czechs [forming Czechoslovakia]. Other Hungarian lands went to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. A slice of Hungary was even ceded to Austria.... Of the 18 million under Hungarian rule in 1910, 10 million were taken away.

Such mass displacements were a conspicuous deviation from Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination that had inspired Americans in their entry into the war. In one section, Buchanan shows how many of Wilson's lofty Fourteen Points were ditched in the war's aftermath.

As for Germany, the nation lost contiguous territories: Northern Schleswig to Denmark, Eupen and Malmédy to Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine to France, and the Polish Corridor and other lands to the newly recreated Poland. Colonies were also stripped away:

Germany's islands in the South Pacific had been mandated to Australia and New Zealand. German South-West Africa had gone to South Africa. German East Africa (Tanganyika) had become a British mandate. The Cameroons and Togoland were divided between Britain and France.

Britain was the great victor. "Out of the war fought to make the world safe for democracy, the British Empire had added 950,000 square miles and millions of subjects."

Germany was forced to accept full guilt for the war, give up trade privileges, and accept the massively crippling liability of paying off the Allies' war debts, including the pensions of retired British soldiers. The "war to end all wars" weakened Germany and the old Russian Empire, making them susceptible to Nazi and Bolshevik takeover. "A poisonous spirit of revenge" plagued the close of the world's greatest conflict and the seeds were planted for another, far greater one in two decades. But as Buchanan argues, World War II would have still not occurred if not for the diplomatic folly, especially on Britain's part, in the intervening years.

The interwar period

Europe did not want another European war and was cynical and tired when the high goals of the Great War never materialized. Early in the 1920s, Churchill, one of the most vocal proponents of war with the kaiser, saw a grave new threat budding, not in defeated Germany, but in Lenin's terror regime in Russia. Almost two decades would pass before the British would again see Germany as the enemy.

The same was true of Japan, which had been a loyal British ally in World War I. The two nations continued their alliance with an important naval treaty: the British navy would protect Japan's sphere of power in the East and for Britain "the benefits of the alliance were apparent. With the Bolsheviks in power in Russia, Britain had as an ally and codefender of India, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the greatest naval power in the western Pacific." Under financial hardships and at the urging of the United States, Britain abandoned this crucial treaty. Japan, the United States, Britain, and France replaced it with the Four-Power Treaty, which had "no enforcement provision."

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria. What was Britain to do?

Had the Anglo-Japanese alliance not been terminated, a modus vivendi like the British-France entente of 1904 could have been negotiated. As Britain had recognized France's primacy in Morocco, and France had given up all claims to Suez, Britain could have accepted Japan's special interest in North China, and Tokyo could have resolved the crisis.

And “[where] were the Americans for whose friendship Britain had sacrificed Japan? [President Herbert] Hoover believed Japan's move into Manchuria was defensive, to protect its empire against a rising China and encroaching Soviet Union.” In 1933, the League of Nations voted to condemn Japan's occupation of Manchuria and demand that it be returned.

Britain voted in favor. Japan walked out. With Hitler now in power in Germany and the specter of a two-front war against Germany and Japan emerging, the British cabinet began to reconsider the wisdom of having thrown over Japan to appease the America that was now isolationist and indifferent, if not hostile, to British imperial interests.

Japan would soon pursue an aggressive, militaristic foreign policy Britain might have served to temper under the old treaty.

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