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Was the “Good War” Unnecessary? Part 3 **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.

Buchanan’s main thesis: Had Britain kept itself armed and neutral instead of giving a guarantee to Poland it couldn’t meaningfully fulfill, it could have avoided a war in Western Europe.

Had Hitler made his deal with Poland, he would have eventually gotten around to attacking Russia. But it’s hard to imagine that Eastern Europe, which bore the majority of fighting, would have been any worse off than it was. Poland, occupied by Nazis throughout the war and by Soviets for decades to come, was hardly saved by the war guarantee, which did not even ostensibly extend to defending the nation against the Soviet invasion that followed shortly after Germany’s.

Once Hitler betrayed Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the British sought out an alliance with the Soviet leader, the man who had murdered perhaps a thousand times as many people as had Hitler as of 1939, when Chamberlain established the Polish war guarantee.

World War II consumed the lives of 50 million people, mostly civilians. The European Jews were nearly exterminated, a genocide for which “Hitler and his collaborators in the unspeakable crimes bear full moral responsibility.”

“But was the Holocaust inevitable?” asks Buchanan. “Could it have been averted?” As he argues, the Nazi regime had not been outright genocidal until the outbreak of the war. “The mass deportations and destruction of the Jews of Europe ... did not begin in 1939 or 1940. They began after Hitler invaded Russia, June 22, 1941.” War was the health of the Nazi state, amplifying and accelerating its evils. Two and a half years into the war the Wannsee Conference was held and implementation of the Final Solution commenced.

“From this chronology, the destruction of the European Jews was not a cause of the war but an awful consequence of the war.” Without the Polish war guarantee, Hitler might have never

invaded France (as his defensive West Wall seemed to indicate). “With no war in the west, all the Jews of Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece might have survived a German-Polish or Nazi-Soviet war, as the Jews of Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland survived.” Because of the war, Hitler “held hostage virtually the entire Jewish population of Europe.”

In response to Churchill’s and Roosevelt’s calls for “unconditional surrender” in 1943 at Casablanca, and in reaction to the American Morgenthau Plan prescribing the total destruction of German industry and the country’s forced transformation into an agricultural state, the Germans, who had remembered what the mere *conditional* surrender in 1918 had meant, fought on, harder and longer than they were likely to have done. The western war was made possible, and extended, by Allied belligerence. Hitler would very likely have murdered many Jews in the east, and indeed did, but with a considerably smaller war, there would have been far more sanctuaries. As it turned out in Eastern Europe, almost all Jews and millions of others were murdered, followed by a half century of Soviet tyranny. How could it have been worse?

Buchanan does well in responding to the argument that Germany was determined to conquer Britain and the West and able to do it. Hitler consistently admired the British Empire, saw it as a natural ally, and made no moves, even at war, to challenge its global naval dominance. He had no military means to conquer Britain, as was shown by his failure to cross the English Channel and win the Battle of Britain. His military plans and armament patterns showed no indication of a serious intention or ability to conquer the island nation. As for America, he had no plans drawn up for a North American invasion, had nowhere near the sufficient navy to ever seriously consider it; stories of Nazi bomber and flight technology have been wildly exaggerated. “German bombers flew at less than three hundred miles per hour. A trip over the Atlantic and back would require twenty hours of flying to drop a five-ton load on New York.” Germany presented no existential threat to the United States. Buchanan quotes the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey (1946): “The world greatly overestimated Germany’s [air] strength.”

Partnering with communists

Meanwhile, the Allies had befriended Stalin, going to great pains to call him “a man of massive outstanding personality ... [and] deep, cool wisdom.” At Yalta, Tehran, Potsdam, and Moscow, Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, and Truman carved up the world. Stalin, whose Red Army had taken the most combat losses against Hitler and sapped Nazi power far more than the battlefronts on the West, emerged triumphant, the greatest victor of the war.

Having annexed Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Stalin, with British and American acquiescence, took Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Albania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. His empire now had 100 million more subjects than before the war. If Western Europe fought the war to protect Eastern Europe from totalitarianism, it failed, only bringing a

war of genocide and terror bombing to its backyard, while leaving Poland, the nation it entered the war to protect, defenseless against Nazi and Soviet tyranny.

During the war, Britain and then America would wage war against the civilian infrastructure and people of Germany and Japan, slaughtering many hundreds of thousands instantly in firebombings and mushroom clouds. As the war closed, the Allies colluded with Stalin to forcibly repatriate millions who had escaped his grip, all of whom faced death or the gulag, and they planned and conducted a mass forced migration of millions of Germans.

Buchanan has a critical eye for the diplomatic bungling of the Allies, while extending sincere admiration to those efforts, such as those of the Poles, of resisting Nazis and Communists. As to the British, “the question ... is not whether the British were heroic. That is settled for all time. But were their statesmen wise?” No, Buchanan concludes.

Churchill’s faults as a racial supremacist, imperialist, and belligerent with shockingly favorable words for both Hitler and Stalin are well documented by Buchanan, but even measuring the Briton by his main goals in political life — to ward off communism, to prevent a single regime from dominating Europe, to protect the integrity of Britain’s empire — renders the man a failure. It was he who, in retrospect, called World War II “the unnecessary war” and confided that, should he be judged by his long-term accomplishments, history would not judge him well. So far, he was wrong about that, too.

The impact on America

For America, World War II meant the loss of 400,000 men, most conscripted, the destruction of civil liberties, and the imposition of a fascist wartime command economy that shoveled 40 percent of the nation’s wealth to the war effort. America’s entry was, however, a triumph for its empire and military-industrial complex, a warfare state that did not retract into near-nonexistence, as after other major American wars, but continued to dominate the world and soak the American taxpayer, first with the pretext of containing former ally Russia and now to wage a global war on terror.

As Buchanan argues, late entry into World War II was why America did so well in its aftermath, adopting Britain’s satellites and taking its place as the world’s superficially liberal empire. But now America faces some of the paradoxes Britain did in the twilight of its own empire.

The United States must bring back restraint in foreign policy. Another world war could also mean the end of the U.S. empire but a conflict that would bring the violent collapse of American hegemony is unlikely to produce anything much better than the conditions after World War I that led to Stalin, Hitler, and World War II; or the conditions after that war, which saw the rise of Mao Zedong, perhaps the greatest killer of all time, and a 40-year Cold War that held the world hostage under mutually assured destruction.

Buchanan is not a libertarian, and in an effort to compare U.S. prudence in the Cold War to British diplomacy surrounding the world wars, we might say he overstates his case somewhat. From a radical libertarian perspective, he might be seen to minimize the evil and destruction of the proxy wars between U.S. and Soviet satellites, and perhaps to downplay the horror of Korea and Vietnam. However, his point is an important one: Had the supposed lessons of Munich been applied in the Cold War, America would have confronted the Soviets head on. Liberals successfully opposed such a policy, thank goodness, even as some of them have still defended and idolized the world war that brought the U.S. empire, nuclear warfare, and the U.S.-Soviet standoff into existence. They easily forget that the man who nuked Hiroshima and Nagasaki also launched the great crusade against communism in Korea.

World War II is the most sacred of wars in American history, even more revered than the Civil War. It is invoked by the Left to argue for the success of national governmental mobilization, for the possibility that massive collectivist undertakings can leave the nation much better off. It is upheld as an example of the greatness of democratic wars. On the Right, World War II affirms the greatness of the U.S. military state, the morality of killing civilians even in large numbers, and suspending civil liberties for a Greater Good. It is seen as a reason to abandon the anti-interventionist heritage of the Old Right, to engage enemies abroad before they strike or even, in many cases, threaten to strike. It alone proves that sometimes even the most socialistic leader is preferable to one who will keep the country out of war.

Libertarians, too, often have a blind spot for this war. The war against Hitler alone supposedly refutes the classic libertarian principle of peace, nonintervention, and free trade. Were it not that the bloodiest of all wars was the “Good War,” there would be less enthusiasm all around for America’s role abroad over the last half-century as the “one indispensable nation,” the “shining city on a hill” that must “promote democracy” and conduct regime change through the barrel of a gun and the deployment of horrible bombs everywhere.

But World War II was not a “Good War.” It was the worst war. It did not stop the Holocaust; in fact, without the war, the Holocaust as we know it would have probably not happened. It did not stop imperial totalitarianism from conquering Poland and Eastern Europe; it led to such conquest. It did not protect Britain and France from a belligerent Germany; it guaranteed they would face its wrath.

The question remains: “Was the war necessary?” Looking back at what he had done, looking east at Stalin’s burgeoning empire, Churchill concluded, “We killed the wrong pig.” He concluded it was an “unnecessary war.” Well versed in the conventional narrative, drawing on hundreds of works by respected historians, Buchanan makes the argument very well that, in this at least, Churchill was right. *Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War* is a great achievement, documented with detail and narrating in striking, elegant prose the story of how, guided by grand principles and poor foresight, British diplomatic blunders were decisive in bringing about a

century of unprecedented bloodshed and despotism. Now that the United States has inherited Britain's empire and its leaders are making similar mistakes, taking on foreign commitments they can't manage, it would behoove all concerned Americans to read Buchanan's newest book.

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