

VOICE

We Remember World War II Wrong

In the middle of the biggest international crisis ever since, it's time to admit what the war was—and wasn't.

BY ADAM TOOZE | MAY 7, 2020, 3:15 PM

One of the casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic is the great Victory Day parade that had been planned for Moscow's Red Square for May 9. It was to have commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany in World War II and the heroic fight of the Red Army in particular. The latest generation of Russian military hardware was to have been on display. For the first time in many years, Moscow was also expecting substantial delegations from the West. In 2015, the Western states had absented themselves from the mammoth 70th anniversary parades in Moscow and Beijing. In 2020, public health concerns kept them away.

It is ironic in a sense because, at least in Anglophone countries, COVID-19 has catapulted the war back into the public mind. In Britain, references to the war have been everywhere. Since his miraculous hospital recovery, Prime Minister Boris Johnson seems to want to be both Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee at the same time. In the scramble for ventilators and personal protective equipment, countries have invoked the model of the war economy. The U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio is now **expected** to exceed levels reached during World War II.

It is not just COVID-19. The last 18 months have seen repeated references to the war as a moment of collective mobilization. The New Dealers thrilled to Franklin D. Roosevelt's call in 1940 to construct a giant air fleet. If the United States could do that then, why could it not do a green industrial revolution today? Among both advocates of global financial reform on the left and defenders of mainstream multilateralism at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, references to the Bretton Woods conference of July 1944 are de rigueur.

The occasion of Victory Day (or Victory in Europe Day), celebrated on May 8 in the West and at the turn of midnight on May 9 in Russia, will be an opportunity to repeat such gestures. But it should be a moment to reflect on their distortions and how this use of history threatens to warp present-day politics.

If China and Russia instrumentalize the war for the purposes of revived nationalism, the weird thing in the West is the peculiarly bloodless quality of people's collective memory. Particularly in what might be called reformist discourse, the war stands as a moment of collective organization and mobilization—but with the violence taken out.

The Blitz is invoked as an image of national solidarity while denying the rather harsher truth that the civilian casualties in London, Birmingham, and other southern cities of England were as bad as they were because of the threadbare air raid precautions deliberately adopted by a cost-conscious Conservative

government. Radical think tank experts advising U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez invoke Roosevelt's waves of bombers, powered of course by high-octane aircraft fuel, while passing over the fact that those aircraft were meant to rain down fire and destruction on the cities of Europe and Japan. In imaginative rearrangement, Bretton Woods comes to figure as a postwar conference at which world powers agreed on a cooperative world economic order, rather than a wartime meeting—coinciding with the breakout battle at Normandy and the destruction of the Army Group Center on the Eastern Front—of a victorious coalition presided over by the United States.

The height of historical reimagining is reached when French and German diplomats look back to 1945 and piously assure each other that this was the moment when they learned to get along better and not to repeat the mistakes of the vindictive Treaty of Versailles. In fact, the reverse is closer to the truth. The Allies learned that forcing Germany to a mere unconditional surrender had been a mistake. As the fighting finally ended in May 1945, the first best option was simply to erase Germany from the map.

One of the historically remarkable things about 1945 is precisely how late Germany's surrender actually came. For the most obtuse members of the Wehrmacht leadership, it was clear from June 1944, when the D-Day invasion was not hurled back into the sea, that Germany's cause was lost. But the Third Reich steeled itself and its population to fight to the bitter end, at huge cost both to the Germans and those who had to pay the price of crushing them. We associate Japan with the **kamikaze myth**, but it surrendered before the Home Islands were invaded. German resistance ended when Soviet and American forces joined hands with no live Germans in between. Not surprisingly, as the end approached, many in and around Adolf Hitler's regime were haunted by apocalyptic imaginings of *finis Germaniae* ("the end of Germany"), an outcome which they were doing their best to make come true through their own actions.

The point of insisting on this violence is not to question its legitimacy in a self-righteous armchair exercise in ethics. The point is to put in question the 21st-century memory of 1945 that leaves the violence out and imagines the world that came after as made out of the positive energies of solidarity, mobilization, and cooperation alone. What this causes us to do is to lose sight of the war itself and how it remade the world. Three types of war came together to consume the Third Reich in the spring of 1945, each of which helped shape the world down to the present day.

The first was the gigantic clash of land armies and accompanying tactical air power that culminated in the battle for Berlin itself. It was preeminently the war waged between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army, and it was out of that furnace that the Soviet military emerged as the most formidable land army the world had ever seen. It founded Soviet domination across Eastern Europe and into the Far East, crushing the Japanese empire in Manchuria as an afterthought in August 1945. This stood in a tradition that extends back, by way of the great struggle with Napoleon, to the emergence of Russia as a modern military power under Peter the Great. This line extends forward into the use of force as part of Russian statecraft today. And that is the tradition that Russian President Vladimir Putin was hoping to put on display in Red Square this week.

The second type of warfare on display in 1945 was the massive war of colonization started by the Third Reich six years earlier, which climaxed as the Red Army itself advanced into Germany. Soviet troops unleashed a wave of violence against civilians, and in particular sexual violence against German women, that gave a new edge to the notion of a racial war. In the immediate aftermath began the ethnic cleansing of the German population of Eastern Europe, the largest forced movement of people at that point, variously estimated at between 12 million and 14.6 million people displaced. This would reshape the ethnic map of Europe and complete the logic of ethnonationalism set in motion by the nationalisms of the 19th century. The reason the reparations that Germany paid after 1945 weren't even larger was because so much of its territory had already been sliced off and so much property simply seized.

(1945 not only marked the end of the great wars of colonial conquest; it gave rise to their antithesis—a new type of revolutionary anti-colonial peasant warfare. The Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong would lay claim to this tradition. But it had its counterparts in the war against Germany waged by Soviet partisans and Josip Broz Tito's Partisan armies in Yugoslavia. After 1945, it would remake large parts of Asia and Africa.)

Finally, the air war and its close relative the naval blockade were the quintessential expression of a modern mode of warfare, in which both Britain and the United States invested the majority of their war efforts. The city of Berlin, which the Red Army blasted its way into beginning on April 16, 1945, was ruined ahead of time by the attacks of the British and American bomber fleets that had begun in earnest in November 1943. All told, they dropped 68,000 tons of explosives on the German capital in addition to the 40,000 tons fired at the city by Soviet artillery in the final two weeks of the war. By 1943, London and Washington had gained complete control of the oceanic highways and much of the airspace of the world. Out of this gigantic effort was born the technology of modern logistics, radar and sonar, a new generation of aircraft with jet propulsion, and the Manhattan Project. Meanwhile, Germany's vain effort to find an answer to the West's air power gave birth to ballistic weapons programs. By the end of the war, cameras mounted on the tips of V-2 rockets fired vertically upward rather than at London or Antwerp were the first to glimpse the outer edge of Earth's atmosphere.

Surprisingly, there are historians who want to argue the priority of one or other of these modes of warfare. That is to miss the point. World War II was what it was because it was all three at once—a global, hypermodern confrontation of air and sea power, the greatest land conflict in history, and the death pangs of colonial warfare. The Axis powers were overwhelmed by the vast pressure brought to bear on all three fronts, from the Atlantic Ocean to the skies above the Pacific, from North Africa to Ukraine and the interior of China. But the complexity of the war also produced the complexity of its outcome.

The crushing defeat of the challenger powers of the 1930s—Germany, Italy, and Japan—was absolute. But none of them was extinguished in the way that they feared. For all the ruination of Germany in 1945, *finis Germaniae* was a dark nationalist fantasy, not a postwar reality. By the 1950s, Germany, Italy and Japan were all back on their feet and integrated into the Western bloc.

For the British, French, and Dutch, though they were on the victorious side, the war brought the end of their empires. Their grievous defeats between 1940 and 1942 unleashed a landslide in their colonies that continued down to the liberation struggles of Vietnam in the 1950s. In the British case, part of the alchemy of historical memory is to have reconfigured 1945 as the founding moment of a new national narrative centered on the welfare state, as though the empire never existed. The Battle of Dunkirk leads on to the National Health Service. The shameful rout in Singapore in February 1942, the violent repression of the Quit India campaign, and the Bengal famine of 1943 have no place in this parochial national story.

The unambiguous victors were the United States and the Soviet Union, which divided the world between them. To call what emerged "empires" is to lack historical imagination. The Cold War blocs were newfangled assemblages of power based on a far more self-conscious articulation of global military power, mobilizing ideologies and economic development more than any empire had ever delivered. In a stark contrast to the experience after World War I, wartime models of production and organization were continued into the aftermath of 1945. The most important manifestation of that continuity of mobilization was in the field of

energy. World War II gave birth both to the atomic age and the widespread adoption of oil as the primary driver of economic growth after 1945. Allied victory and postwar affluence were based not just on their superior political and social organization but on their vastly greater mobilization of natural resources.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, if there is a historical grand narrative that does justice to the significance of the 1945 moment, it is not that of international organizations like the Bretton Woods institutions or national welfare states. It is what 21st-century environmental historians call the “Great Acceleration,” the vast and dramatic acceleration of humanity’s appropriation of nature that reached a turning point in the middle of the 20th century. In its globe-spanning dimensions, in its multifaceted integration of the land, the sea, and the air, and in its violent intensity, World War II was an anticipation and driver of that process, which continues down to the present day.

Of course, invoking the war in political speech can serve many purposes. In the version preferred in the English-speaking world, it combines connotations of solidarity with a low-key patriotism that can be bent to many different ends. But it also encourages a kind of escapism, the progressive political equivalent of children playing at GI Joe. That is not the spirit that the anniversary of the Third Reich’s annihilating defeat should evoke. It should remind us of the giant political and material forces that were mobilized to achieve that victory—the violence that was involved and the price that was paid. It should remind us, for better and for worse, of how far removed we are from that reality, both from its dangers and its possibilities.

Adam Tooze is a history professor and director of the European Institute at Columbia University. His latest book is *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, and he is currently working on a history of the climate crisis. Twitter: [@adam_tooze](#)

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