The Wrong War

I am nervous about the course I am teaching this coming fall, about World War II. As I will explain to the class from the outset, there are a few things I do not know about the topic—namely, when the war began, when it ended, where it happened, who were the key protagonists on each side, or indeed who the sides were. Other than that, my knowledge is comprehensive.

Just when did the war begin? Before answering that, we must ask: Which war? and Which nation is remembering it? Britain and France have one answer; the United States, a totally different one; China and the Ukraine, yet others. Increasingly, though, it is difficult to draw lines between the two world wars, or to see the intervening years as anything more than a temporary cease-fire. Looking globally, a spasm of mass violence was clearly underway by the early or mid-1930’s, in China, Spain, Ethiopia, and elsewhere, and, to a greater or lesser extent, these conflicts merged into the giant struggle that attracts the label of World War II.

The question of “which war” becomes still more pressing if we shift our gaze from Western obsessions to consider the Soviet Union. Under Western eyes—especially American—the war was an heroic conflict to stop a ruthlessly homicidal dictatorship from dominating the world and reshaping its future history as a global slave state. For much of Europe, the struggle was rather a contest to manage to nuke Berlin. The other vast loser in the war was China, which may have suffered 20 million fatalities fighting Japan. The problem, though, is that this figure includes all deaths from 1931 onward, so most are not counted in conventional statistics of war losses, since they did not happen in the “real” war that began much later, either at Danzig or Pearl Harbor. The Nanking massacre of 1937 was thus not part of “the war.” Nor does the Chinese figure include the deaths inflicted by the new communist regime that established itself in 1949 as a direct consequence of the war. Including purges, executions, and man-made famine together, that would account for some 50 million additional deaths by 1960. Again, looking at the century as a whole, and on a global scale, “the war” seems to run from around 1930 to 1960, with the early 1940’s marking only one horrendous period among several.

None of these comments are intended to minimize the achievements of the Western Allies, of what likely was a “greatest generation.” But just how can conventional Western accounts so distort the historical picture? Partly, the dearth of attention paid to Eastern Europe or East Asia reflects Anglo-American parochialism and the sense that what did not affect them directly did not exist. Once “the war” was defined as raging only from 1939/41 through 1945, and mainly in the West, any larger context could be ignored. Also, political factors meant that liberals and radicals were deeply reluctant to see any moral equivalence between Nazis and communists and, thus, to pay due attention to Stalinist atrocities that were quite comparable to those of Hitler. Finally, we, as consumers of news and history, naturally demand a neat and satisfying narrative, in which a villain of equal stature is allying with a villain of equal stature is scarcely acceptable. In the end, who did win in 1945?

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For whatever reasons, I believe that conventional U.S. accounts of World War II are studying the wrong war in the wrong time and the wrong place. Wish me luck in my course.