

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 under way 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 see which of two such monstrosities, Nazi or Soviet, would determine the fate of the world, and failing to see it in that light means missing a good deal more than half the story. From this perspective, the era of mass killing really began in the early 1930's, with a series of monumental Stalinist crimes—the slaughter of the Soviet peasantry, the devastation of the Ukraine, and the political purges: assume eight million deaths all told through the decade. “The war” was certainly in progress by 1937, when Hitler and Stalin were sparring in Spain. And it ended—when? Ukrainian resistance against Stalin petered out in the early 1950's; the Lithuanian struggle, some years afterward; and we can see the Hungarian revolt of 1956 as an attempt to re-

open that particular front.

Few American retrospectives on the war fail to comment on particular battles—Omaha Beach, Okinawa, Iwo Jima—as “the bloodiest,” “the most savage,” the turning point of the war, and so on. Most such claims indicate a mind-boggling lack of proportion, mainly because they fail to understand where the main battles were taking place. Statistics make the point. All European states combined lost around 47 million dead in the war years, as conventionally defined: That figure includes the six million or so Jews murdered by the Nazis. Of the overall total, the Soviet Union alone lost around 29 million, with four more nations—Germany, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Rumania—losing a combined total of 14 million. All other European participants combined lost around four million. Taking Pacific and European theaters together, the United States lost some 420,000 dead, or roughly one American fatality for every 70 Soviets.

It is scarcely surprising that the Russians continue to think that the Soviet Union won the war while the Western Allies held coats, and many American or British veterans would have some sympathy for this view. Just ask any of the “greatest generation” how they would have felt about the D-Day landings if they knew they could expect to encounter an additional 50 or so SS divisions—soldiers who in reality were by then lying dead on the *Ostfront*. If the Soviet Union had fallen, the West could only have defeated Germany by avoiding any ground conflict and biding their time until they could 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 is destroyed and the war is won, and the thought that we only did this by allying with a villain of equal stature is scarcely acceptable. In the end, who did win in 1945?

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. 