

Margaret MacMillan: Rebuilding the World after the Second World War (2009)

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As many as 60 million dead, great cities reduced to rubble, families torn apart... The second world war caused unprecedented hardship, but it also accelerated change.

At the end of the first world war it had been possible to contemplate going back to business as usual. However, 1945 was different, so different that it has been called Year Zero. The capacity for destruction had been so much greater than in the earlier war that much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins. And this time civilians had been the target as much as the military. The figures are hard to grasp: as many as 60 million dead, 25 million of them Soviet. A new word, genocide, entered the language to deal with the murder of 6 million of Europe's Jews by the Nazis.

During the war, millions more had fled their homes or been forcibly moved to work in Germany or Japan or, in the case of the Soviet Union, because Stalin feared that they might be traitors. Now, in 1945, another new word appeared, the DP, or "displaced person". There were millions of them, some voluntary refugees moving westward in the face of the advancing Red Army, others deported as undesirable minorities. The newly independent Czech state expelled nearly 3 million ethnic Germans in the years after 1945, and Poland a further 1.3 million. Everywhere there were lost or orphaned children, 300,000 alone in Yugoslavia. Thousands of unwanted babies added to the misery. It is impossible to know how many women in Europe were raped by the Red Army soldiers, who saw them as part of the spoils of war, but in Germany alone some 2 million women had abortions every year between 1945 and 1948.

The allies did what they could to feed and house the refugees and to reunite families that had been forcibly torn apart, but the scale of the task and the obstacles were enormous. The majority of ports in Europe and many in Asia had been destroyed or badly damaged; bridges had been blown up; railway locomotives and rolling stock had vanished. Great cities such as Warsaw, Kiev, Tokyo and Berlin were piles of rubble and ash.

In Germany, it has been estimated, 70% of housing had gone and, in the Soviet Union, 1,700 towns and 70,000 villages. Factories and workshops were in ruins, fields, forests and vineyards ripped to pieces. Millions of acres in north China were flooded after the Japanese destroyed the dykes. Many Europeans were surviving on less than 1,000 calories per day; in the Netherlands they were eating tulip bulbs. Apart from the United States and allies such as Canada and Australia, who were largely unscathed by the war's destruction, the European powers such as Britain and France had precious little to spare. Britain had largely bankrupted itself fighting the war and France had been stripped bare by the Germans. They were struggling to look after their own peoples and deal with reincorporating their military into civilian society. The four horsemen of the apocalypse—pestilence, war, famine and death—so familiar during the middle ages, appeared again in the modern world.

New 'superpowers'

Politically, the impact of the war was also great. The once great powers of Japan and Germany looked as though they would never rise again. In retrospect, of course, it is easy to see that their peoples, highly educated and skilled, possessed the capacity to rebuild their shattered societies. (And it may have been easier to build strong economies from scratch than the partially damaged ones of the victors.) Two powers, so great that the new term "superpower" had to be coined for them, dominated the world in 1945. The United States was both a military power and an economic one; the Soviet Union had only brute force and the intangible attraction of Marxist ideology to keep its own people down and manage its newly acquired empire in the heart of Europe.

The great European empires, which had controlled so much of the world, from Africa to Asia, were on their last legs and soon to disappear in the face of their own weakness and rising nationalist movements. We should not view the war as being responsible for all of this, however; the rise of the US and the Soviet Union and the weakening of the European empires had been happening long before 1939. The war acted as an accelerator.

It also accelerated change in other ways: in science and technology, for example. The world got atomic weapons but it also got atomic power. Under the stimulus of war, governments poured resources into developing new medicines and technologies. Without the war, it would have taken us much longer, if ever, to enjoy the benefits of penicillin, microwaves, computers—the list goes on. In many countries, social change also speeded up.

The shared suffering and sacrifice of the war years strengthened the belief in most democracies that governments had an obligation to provide basic care for all citizens. When it was elected in the summer of 1945, for example, the Labour government in Britain moved rapidly to establish the welfare state. The rights of women also took a huge step forward as their contribution to the war effort, and their share in the suffering, were recognised. In France and Italy, women finally got the vote.

If class divisions in Europe and Asia did not disappear, the moral authority and prestige of the ruling classes had been severely undermined by their failure to prevent the war or the crimes that they had condoned before and during it. Established political orders—fascist, conservative, even democratic—came under challenge as peoples looked for new ideas and leaders. In Germany and Japan, democracy slowly took root.

In China, people turned increasingly from the corrupt and incompetent nationalists to the communists. While many Europeans, wearied by years of war and privation, gave up on politics altogether and faced the future with glum pessimism, others hoped that, at last, the time had come to build a new and better society. In western Europe, voters turned to social democratic parties such as the Labour party in Britain. In the east, the new communist regimes that were imposed by

the triumphant Soviet Union were at first welcomed by many as the agents of change.

The end of the war inevitably also brought a settling of scores. In many parts people took measures into their own hands. Collaborators were beaten, lynched or shot. Women who had fraternised with German soldiers had their heads shaved or worse. Governments sometimes followed suit, setting up special courts for those who had worked with the enemy and purging such bodies as the civil service and the police. The Soviets also tried to exact reparations from Germany and Japan; whole factories were dismantled down to the window frames and were carted off to the Soviet Union, where they frequently rotted away. Much of the revenge was to gain advantage in the postwar world. In China and eastern Europe the communists used the accusation of collaboration with the Japanese or the Nazis to eliminate their political and class enemies.

German de-Nazification

The allies instituted an ambitious programme of de-Nazification in Germany, later quietly abandoned as it became clear that German society would be unworkable if all former Nazis were forbidden to work. In Japan, the head of the occupation, General Douglas MacArthur, broke up the *zaibatsu*, the big conglomerates that were blamed for supporting the Japanese militarists, and introduced a range of reforms, from a new school curriculum to a democratic constitution, that were designed to turn Japan into a peaceable democratic nation. In both Germany and Japan, the victors set up special tribunals to try those responsible for crimes against peace, war crimes, and the catalogue of horrors that came increasingly to be known as “crimes against humanity”.

In Tokyo, leading Japanese generals and politicians, and at Nuremberg, senior Nazis (those that had not committed suicide or escaped), stood in the dock before allied judges. Not a few people then and since wondered if the trials were merely victors’ justice, their moral authority undercut by the presence, in Nuremberg, of judges and prosecutors from Stalin’s murderous regime, and by the fact that

in Tokyo, the emperor, in whose name the crimes had been committed, was shielded from blame.

The trials, inconclusive though they were, formed part of a larger attempt to root out the militaristic and chauvinistic attitudes that had helped to produce the war, and to build a new world order that would prevent such a catastrophe from ever happening again. Well before the war had ended, the allies had started planning for the peace. Among the western powers, the United States, by 1945 very much the dominant partner in the alliance, took the lead.

In his Four Freedoms speech of January 1941, President Roosevelt talked of a new and more just world, with freedom of speech and expression and of religion, and freedom from want and fear. In the Atlantic charter later that year, he and Churchill sketched out a world order based on such liberal principles as collective security, national self-determination, and free trade among nations. A host of other allies, some of them represented by governments in exile, signed on.

The Soviet Union gave a qualified assent, although its leader Stalin had no intention of following what were to him alien principles. Roosevelt intended that the American vision should take solid institutional form. The key organisation was the United Nations, designed to be stronger than the League of Nations, which it was replacing, and the economic ones known collectively as the Bretton Woods system, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. This time, Roosevelt was determined, the United States should join. Stalin again gave grudging support.

Common humanity

While much of what Roosevelt hoped for did not come about, it was surely a step forward for international relations that such institutions were created and largely accepted and, equally important, that they were underpinned by notions of a common humanity possessing the same universal rights. The idea that there were universal standards to be upheld was present, no matter how imperfectly, in the war crimes trials, and was later reinforced by the establishment of the

United Nations itself in 1945, the International Court of Justice in 1946 and Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.

It had already become clear at the top-level conferences of Teheran (1943), Yalta (February 1945) and Potsdam (July-August 1945) that there was a gulf in what constituted universal values and goals between the United States and its fellow democracies and the Soviet Union. Stalin was interested above all in security for his regime and for the Soviet Union, and that to him meant taking territory, from Poland and other neighbours, and establishing a ring of buffer states around Soviet borders. In the longer run, where the western powers saw a democratic and liberal world, he dreamed of a communist one.

The grand alliance held together uneasily for the first months of the peace, but the strains were evident in their shared occupation of Germany, where increasingly the Soviet zone of occupation was moving in a communist direction and the western zones, under Britain, France and the United States, in a more capitalist and democratic one.

By 1947, two very different German societies were emerging. In addition, the western powers watched with growing consternation and alarm the elimination of non-communist political forces in eastern Europe and the establishment of Peoples' Republics under the thumb of the Soviet Union. Soviet pressure on its neighbours, from Norway in the north to Turkey and Iran in the south, along with Soviet spy rings and Soviet-inspired sabotage in western countries, further deepened western concerns. For their part, Soviet leaders looked on western talk of such democratic procedures as free elections in eastern Europe as Trojan horses designed to undermine their control of their buffer states, and regarded the Marshall plan, which funnelled American aid into Europe, as a cover for extending the grip of capitalism. Furthermore, their own Marxist-Leninist analysis of history told them that sooner or later the capitalist powers would turn on the Soviet Union. Within two years of second world war's end, the cold war was an established fact.

Both sides built military alliances and prepared for the new shooting war that many feared was bound to come. In 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, giving it parity, at least in that area, with the United States. That the cold war did not in the end turn into a hot one was thanks to that fact. The terrifying new power of atomic

weapons was to lead to a standoff suitably known as Mad—Mutually Assured Destruction.

The cold war overshadowed another momentous international change that came as a result of the second world war. Before 1939 much of the non-European world had been divided up among the great empires: the ones based in western Europe but also those of Japan and the Soviet Union. Japan and Italy lost their empires as a result of defeat. Britain, France, and the Netherlands all saw their imperial possessions disappear in the years immediately after the war. (The Soviet Union was not to lose its until the end of the cold war.)

Empires crumble

The former imperial powers no longer had the financial and military capacity to hang on to their vast territories. Nor did their peoples want to pay the price of empire, whether in money or blood. Furthermore, where the empires had once dealt with divided or acquiescent peoples, they now increasingly faced assertive and, in some cases, well-armed nationalist movements. The defeat of European forces all over Asia also contributed to destroying the myth of European power.

The British pulled out of India in 1947, leaving behind two new countries of India and Pakistan. Burma, Sri Lanka and Malaysia followed the road of independence not long after. The Dutch fought a losing war but finally conceded independence to Indonesia, the former Dutch East Indies, in 1949. France tried to regain its colonies in Indochina but was forced out in 1954 after a humiliating defeat at the hands of Vietnamese forces. The Europeans' African empires crumbled in the 1950s and early 1960s. The United Nations grew from 51 nations in 1945 to 189 by the end of the century.

Because of the cold war, there was no comprehensive peace settlement after the second world war as there had been in 1919. Instead there were a number of separate agreements or ad hoc decisions. In Europe most of the borders that had been established at the end of the first world war were restored.

The Soviet Union seized back some bits of territory such as Bessarabia, which it had lost to Romania in 1919. The one major exception was Poland, as the joke had it “a country on wheels”, which

moved some 200 miles to the west, losing some 69,000 sq metres to the Soviet Union and gaining slightly less from Germany in the west. In the east, Japan of course lost the conquests it had made since 1931, but was also obliged to disgorge Korea and Formosa (now Taiwan) and the Pacific islands that it had gained decades earlier. Eventually the United States and Japan concluded a formal peace in 1951. Because of an outstanding dispute over some islands, the Soviet Union and its successor Russia have not yet signed a peace treaty ending the war with Japan.

Remembering the war

We have long since absorbed and dealt with the physical consequences of the second world war, but it still remains a very powerful set of memories. How societies remember and commemorate the past often says something about how they see themselves—and can be highly contentious. Particularly in divided societies, it is tempting to cling to comforting myths to help bring unity and to paper over deep and painful divisions. In the years immediately after 1945, many societies chose to forget the war or remember it only in certain ways. Austria portrayed itself as the first victim of Nazism, conveniently ignoring the active support that so many Austrians had given the Nazi regime. In Italy, the fascist past was neglected in favour of the earlier periods of Italian history. For a long time, schools did not teach any history after the first world war. Italians were portrayed in films or books as essentially good-hearted and generally opposed to Mussolini, whose regime was an aberration in an otherwise liberal state.

In France, the Vichy period, after France's defeat by Germany, when there was widespread French collaboration, some of it enthusiastically antisemitic and pro-Nazi, was similarly ignored. From de Gaulle onwards, French leaders played up the resistance in such a way as to claim its moral authority but also to imply that it was more broadly based and widespread than it actually was.

West Germany was not able to escape its past so easily; under pressure from the allies and from within, it dealt much more thoroughly with its Nazi past. In West German schools, children learned about the horrors committed by the regime. East Germany, by contrast, took

no responsibility, instead blaming the Nazis on capitalism. Indeed, many East Germans grew up believing that their country had fought with the Soviet Union against Hitler's regime.

In the east, Japan has been accused of ignoring its aggression in the 1930s and its own war crimes in China and elsewhere, but in recent years it has moved to teach more about this dark period in its history.

How should the past be remembered? When should we forget? These are not easy questions. Acknowledging such difficult parts of the past is not always easy and has led to history becoming a political football in a number of countries. In Japan, the conservatives minimise Japanese responsibility for the war and downplay atrocities on nationalist grounds. Japan, they argue, should not apologise for the past when all powers were guilty of aggression.

It has not necessarily been easier among the nations on the winning side. When French and foreign historians first began examining the Vichy period in France critically, they were attacked from both the right and the left for stirring up memories that were best left undisturbed. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was, for a time, a willingness among Russians to acknowledge that many crimes were committed in Stalin's regime in the course of the war, whether the mass murder of Polish army officers at Katyn or the forcible deportation of innocent Soviet citizens to Siberia.

Today, the conservatives argue that such criticism of the great patriotic war only gives comfort to Russia's foes. Britain and Canada played a major role in the mass bombing campaign of German cities and towns; suggestions that the destruction of Dresden or other targets that may have had little military significance might be war crimes causes impassioned debate in both countries. That the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have been morally wrong or unnecessary causes equal controversy in the United States.

Today, particularly in the countries that were on the winning side, there is a reluctance to disturb our generally positive memories of the war by facing such issues. The second world war, especially in the light of what came after, seems to be the last morally unambiguous war. The Nazis and their allies were bad and they did evil things. The allies were good and right to fight them.

That is true, but the picture is not quite as black and white as we might like to think. After all, one ally was the Soviet Union, in its own way as guilty of crimes against humanity as Nazi Germany, fascist Italy or Japan. Britain and France may have been fighting for liberty, but they were not prepared to extend it to their empires. And Dresden, or the firebombing of Hamburg, Tokyo and Berlin, the forcible repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, should remind us that bad things can be done in the name of good causes. Let us remember the war, but let us not remember it simplistically but in all its complexity.