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Is the slaughter ever worth it?

On the eve of World Peace Day, we reflect on the 80th anniversary of D-Day, drawing crucial lessons from history as global tensions rise once more

The ceremonies marking the 80th anniversary of D-Day on 6 June commemorated the thousands of young lives lost on the beaches of Normandy in 1944. While the media eagerly criticised British then Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for skipping some commemorative events, it is worth asking: What was being honoured? Was it the courage of 'our' soldiers – as opposed to their German counterparts – or the freedoms they were fighting for?

Before World War I, few people questioned the grounds for sending soldiers into battle. In the pre-modern world, people fought for God. In modern times, they fought for 'King and Country'. Both religious faith and patriotism were viewed as inherently noble causes that justified enormous sacrifices.

It was only in the nineteenth century that people began questioning the causes for which young men were asked to fight, giving rise to the first modern peace movements. While these groups were influenced by various strands of thought, including Christian pacifism, they were primarily driven by the emergence of humanitarianism and the economics of capitalism.

Mischievous delusions

The popular enthusiasm that greeted the outbreak of WWI in 1914 overshadowed the nascent peace movement, as Europe's major political parties rallied behind their respective countries. But the war's catastrophic death toll soon revived the question: Could such a sacrifice be justified? 'Among the countries that had participated in the war, there is still a tendency among many bereaved ones to assuage themselves by the thought that their dead had fallen for something noble and worthwhile', wrote William Gerhardie in his 1925 novel *The Polyglots*. This, he added, was a 'mischievous delusion. Their dead are victims –

neither more nor less – of the folly of adults who, having blundered the world into a ludicrous war, now build memorials to square it all up.'

In addition to the nine million soldiers killed and the 21 million wounded between 1914 and 1918, 15 million soldiers were killed and 25 million more were injured during World War II. Including civilian casualties, the two wars and related events, such as the 1918-20 influenza pandemic, claimed nearly 200 million lives, roughly one-tenth of the world's population at that time. Was the slaughter worth it?

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Not all wars have the same moral value. While WWI was a tragic and unnecessary conflict into which, as Gerhardie wrote, Europe's major powers were led by incompetent leaders, the same cannot be said of WWII. Today, we take it for granted that Nazi Germany had to be stopped and we condemn those who tried to appease Adolf Hitler instead of standing up to him when it would have been easier to do so. Ever since, 'appeasement' has been regarded as a dirty word.

In his 1961 book *The Origins of the Second World War*, British historian A.J.P. Taylor offered a different perspective, arguing that the Munich Agreement of 1938, which allowed Hitler to annex part of Czechoslovakia, represented 'a triumph of all that was best and most enlightened in British life'. Most historians were appalled by this statement and Taylor's reputation never fully recovered. But what Taylor was trying to convey was that the reluctance to engage in another war against Germany after the slaughter of WWI was not inherently dishonourable and that Winston Churchill's opposition to appeasement was initially disregarded because he was widely seen as a warmonger.

Taylor also understood that democracy is not a guarantee of peaceful intent. As he noted, 'Bismarck fought "necessary" wars and killed "thousands"; the idealists of the twentieth century fought "just" wars and killed millions.' In his view, democratic idealists were the spiritual heirs to Christian missionaries — it was not peace they sought, but conversion. The content of the sermons changed, but the evangelical spirit remained, with human rights becoming the new gospel.

While Article 51 of the United Nations Charter recognises self-defence as the only just cause of war, what constitutes self-defence is often open to interpretation. Israel, for example, used self-defence to justify its pre-emptive strike on the Egyptian air force, which triggered the 1967 Six-

Day War. The United States invoked the concept of pre-emptive self-defence to support its 2003 invasion of Iraq and Russia relied on similar reasoning to justify its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Prioritising peace

The British author Anthony Burgess divided European history from the High Middle Ages to the end of WWII into alternating periods of limited and total wars. From 1000 to 1550, Europe experienced limited conflicts that were primarily feudal and dynastic. This was followed by an era of widespread religious upheaval from 1550 to 1648. By contrast, military engagements between 1649 and 1789 were mostly limited to colonial struggles. The period between 1789 and 1815 was characterised by a return to large-scale warfare, driven by revolutionary and nationalist fervour, whereas the following century was marked by limited colonial and commercial conflicts. Finally, Europe faced the two devastating world wars between 1914 and 1945.

The postwar period was marked by eight decades of relative peace enforced by the US and the Soviet Union, and later by the US alone. However, geopolitical tensions have spiked in recent years, triggering multiple regional conflicts with the potential to escalate into another full-scale global war.

Above all, we must prioritise peace over total war and heed the lessons of past global catastrophes.

There are three reasons why periods of relative peace do not last. First, the peace treaties that end large-scale wars may contain the seeds of future conflicts. This was certainly true of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended WWI. Second, emerging powers, such as China today, may undermine the foundations of enduring global peace. Third, human societies tend to become restless after living peacefully for an extended period.

As the world once again divides into hostile economic and geopolitical blocs, this year's 80th anniversary of D-Day offers an opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices we are prepared to make to defend our values. Above all, we must prioritise peace over total war and heed the lessons of past global catastrophes.

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