

The Meaning of World War II—An Anarchist View

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It is now 70 years since the end of the Second World War (1939–1945). It is often referred to as the “Good War” or even the “Last Good War.” The U.S. soldiers who fought it have been called the “Greatest Generation.” Since wars are best seen as evils unless proven otherwise, it is worth asking why World War II has such a good reputation, and whether it deserves it. After all, approximately 60 million people died around the world from that war.

I am going to argue that World War II was not the “Good War,” that it was a war between imperialist states fighting for global domination. But it was not “nothing but” an inter-imperialist war—not “simply” an inter-imperialist war. It had several aspects, some of which were worth supporting, and others which were not. Of course, the war is long over. But its effects are still being felt, and thinking it through may help us to deal with current issues.

“World War II was an immensely popular war. The entire American left, with the exception of minuscule groups of pacifists and Trotskyists, enthusiastically supported it.” (Wald 1987; 195) (The Communists were “antiwar” for the duration of the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939-1941. Once Germany attacked the Soviet Union, they became super-American-patriots—for the sake of the USSR.) In this it differed from the First World War. In World War I, there was a significant Left minority which opposed it as an inter-imperialist conflict. In the US, Eugene Debs went to prison for speaking against the war. Among Marxists internationally, there were Luxemburg and Leibknecht, Lenin and Trotsky, and others who laid the basis for the Communist International. Among anarchists, a few prominent anarchists agreed with Kropotkin in fervently supporting the Allies, but the big majority repudiated them and opposed the whole war.

Yet in the Second World War, opposition on the Left was tiny. It was down to the Trotskyists (a splinter of the Communists), libertarian Marxists (“ultra-leftists”), some anarchists, and radical pacifists. A few radicals might be said to have “supported the war” only in the sense of being in solidarity with the anti-fascist and democratic aspects of its mass struggles—while still opposing the capitalism and imperialism of both sides.

The Axis

The most obvious reason for wide-spread support for the war, on the Left and far beyond, was the nature of the Axis powers: mainly Germany, Italy, and Japan. Unlike the First World War, there really was a qualitative difference between the two sides. As authoritarian as was the Kaiser’s Germany, it had an elected parliament, with a large Social Democratic party. In the Second World War, Hitler’s Germany, the main Axis power, was also a product of capitalism and the national state. But Nazism was the vilest, most anti-human, political system ever created by human beings. Authoritarian police states had repressed people but left them alone so long as they did not rebel against the government. Nazism was not merely authoritarian but totalitarian, trying to control every aspect of social and personal life under its twisted ideology, from churches to chess clubs. It smashed the unions and leftist parties, jailing and killing thousands of workers and millions of people who did not fit into its psychotic racial framework.

The German capitalist class had responded to the world economic crisis of the ‘thirties by junking its capitalist democracy and putting the Nazis in power. Its rulers sought to revive its capitalism through arms production and looting other countries. They dragooned large numbers of conquered workers for super-exploited slave labor in German factories. They occupied old, well-established, nations and reduced them to colonies. Besides exterminating millions of Jews,

Romany (Gypsies), Gay men, physically disabled, and political opponents, the Nazi regime was planning⁶ to exterminate tens of millions more in Eastern Europe. Its aim was not merely to expand its power but to replace Britain as the major world power, and to repopulate Eastern Europe with its own people.

Of the other two main Axis states, Mussolini's Italy was the first to establish fascism. Being weaker than Germany, its capitalist establishment had been eager to save itself from economic crisis and working class discontent by bringing the Fascist Party to power. It sought to build a new empire in North Africa and the Middle East. Militarist, Imperial Japan had its own racist mythology by which it justified its brutal conquest of China and, if it could, most of Asia and the Pacific nations.

Being late-comers to the imperialist division of the world, these nations' rulers had "no choice" (as imperialists) but to attack the existing order—making them the "aggressors." So Japan attacked China and then the U.S. at Pearl Harbor. Italy attacked Ethiopia. Germany attacked Poland (setting off the war) and later attacked the Soviet Union (with whom it had a nonaggression pact). In the end, the Axis did not have the forces to defeat the British empire, the vast and populous Soviet Union, and the big and industrially productive U.S.A., while popular resistance grew in every occupied country. The victory of the Allies was highly probable from the start—but not inevitable (which is why they had to fight a war).

The Western Allies

A lot of support for the Allies was based on their (bourgeois) democracy. This was true of Great Britain, the U.S., and (before being conquered), many other European states. They had elected governments, (relative) civil freedoms, the right to form labor unions and workers' parties, and so on. Whatever their limitations under capitalism, these democratic rights made a real difference in workers' lives and were far different from what existed under fascism.

However, these were still capitalist countries. In every one, a small number of people, the capitalists (or bourgeoisie), without any democratic control over them, owned and controlled the economy. They dominated the government and every other aspect of society. This fit the Marxist and anarchist view that even the best bourgeois democracy was a "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."

These capitalist democracies were imperialist states. There was nothing subtle about this for Great Britain, with its British empire literally "owning" many nations. It covering a quarter of the world—an empire "where the sun never sets and the blood never dries." In India, the British ruled more people than Nazi Germany conquered at its height. The French empire had ten percent of the world. The Dutch and Belgium empires were smaller yet, although the Dutch "owned" the large nation of Indonesia.

The U.S. only directly owned a few countries, such as Puerto Rico and—at the time—the Philippines. Hawaii, where Pearl Harbor was located, had been stolen from the Hawaiian government by US marines, in the interest of the plantation owners. But the U.S. used its domination of the international market to rule over Latin America, only occasionally using direct military intervention. Internally, the U.S. was rotten with white racism. Thousands of African-Americans lived under conditions of terror in the Jim Crow South and faced white race riots in the North.

Loyal Japanese-Americans were put in concentration camps for the duration of the war. The U.S. military was rigidly segregated.

During the war, as the Nazis were gassing and burning millions of European Jews, the U.S. and Britain refused to open their borders to let the Jews escape from Europe. They also rejected suggestions to bomb the death camps such as Auschwitz or the railroads leading to them. The motivation for this callousness was due to anti-Semitic racism. Objectively, of course, the victory of the Allies ended the mass murder. Had the Axis won, many millions more would have been turned into ashes. But so long as the war continued, the Allies were junior partners with the Nazis in the Holocaust.

Despite calling themselves “democracies,” the Allied states ruled vast numbers of people in their colonies—people who had no more control over their governments than did the people of Germany or Italy. This made the championing of “freedom” and “democracy” sheer hypocrisy. Their real interests were to reconquer their empires and—in the case of the U.S.—to expand its empire, to take over from the weakened British and French empires.

The Soviet Union and China

Then there was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, ruled by the despot Stalin. Around the world, millions had illusions in the Soviet Union, believing that it was some sort of “socialism” (or “workers’ state” or the equivalent). It had the authority of the 1917 October Russian revolution, and the reality that private, stock-owning, capitalism had been replaced by a collectivized, nationalized, economy. Except for the period of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Soviet Russia had been an opponent of Nazi Germany. Anti-fascists wanted to think well of the Soviet Union, which caused them to shut their eyes to its reality.

The Soviet Union had a totalitarian state structure similar to Nazi Germany’s. It did not have share-holding, traditional, capitalists, but the bureaucracy ruled collectively, with absolute power. The workers and peasants had no democratic rights whatsoever and were ruthlessly exploited at work and oppressed outside of it. This was state capitalism (because the workers sold their ability to work to the bureaucrats as commodities and the economy was driven to accumulate). Yet, while the repression was ruthless (murdering millions), unlike the Nazis it did not kill vast numbers for no reason at all except for bizarre racial phantasies.

The Soviet Union was also an empire. The Russians ruled over a set of nations oppressed within the USSR (including Ukraine, Kazakstan, and others). It expanded its empire in the course of the war, coming to rule over almost all of Eastern Europe, up to a third of Germany. This de facto empire included Poland, which is ironic considering the war officially started because Germany attacked Poland.

To whip up support from its people, the Stalinist state dropped its pseudo-socialist rhetoric, which its people did not take seriously any more, and pushed nationalist Russian propaganda. Their soldiers were not told that they were liberating German workers from their Nazi rulers but that they were defending the Russian people from the German hordes. Partly as a result, the conquest of eastern Germany by the Soviet Union’s army was accompanied by a wave of mass rapes of German women.

Also on the Allied side was China. The Japanese military attacked and occupied China in an extremely brutal fashion, slaughtering civilians and committing mass rapes. China had been an

oppressed nation, dominated, divided, and exploited by the European empires (with the U.S. demanding its right to also exploit China through its “Open Door” policy). Now it faced its worst national oppression, by the Japanese imperialists. China was officially led by Chiang Kai-Shek’s corrupt and inefficient Nationalist government, but this was in a semi-civil war with Mao’s Communist army. Some other Asian and Pacific nations, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, also developed anti-Japanese resistances.

Popular Opposition to the Allies

It is obvious why so many supported the Allies as the “good guys” in World War II. But, to a certain extent, to see the war as the “Good War” is a Euro-centric view. Millions of people throughout the world detested the European and US empires. They were glad to see these empires defeated. They were impressed by the defeat of the white imperialists by the Japanese—People of Color. If they did not support the Axis, they were at least neutral in the war.

Anti-Allied sentiment was widespread in the Arab North Africa and Middle East. Hating their British and French masters, many Arabs looked to Germany to save them (on the principle that “the enemy of my enemy must be my friend”—not always a reliable approach). There were similar feelings throughout much of colonized Africa and Asia. Led by Sukarno, the Indonesians welcomed the Japanese, hoping they would free them from the Dutch. Many Malaysian and Burmese were glad to see the Japanese defeat the British colonists.

In India, the Congress Party offered to support the British in the war, if only the British would grant India its independence. The British refused and Congress declared a program of “Quit India!” The British threw Gandhi and Nehru into prison. During the war years, there were massive riots, strikes, and the occupation by Indian workers of whole cities. Subhas Chandra Bose attempted to build up an Indian National Army, in alliance with the Japanese. By the end of the war it became obvious to most English politicians that they could not hold onto India.

In Europe, the Irish Republic remained officially neutral. It would not allow British warships to dock in its ports. Irish leaders knew that if the Nazis won, the Gestapo would be even worse than the Black-and-Tans. But it would have been impossible—even laughable—to tell the Irish population that the British were fighting for “freedom,” “democracy,” and the rights of oppressed nations!

In the Soviet Union, Ukrainians hated the Stalinist regime. The Communist state had waged a war against the Ukrainian peasants, taking their land and forcing them into state-run collective farms. Stalin had seized a large part of the wheat crop, for overseas’ sales, creating an artificial famine in which millions died. So when the German army arrived, many Ukrainians greeted them as liberators, offering them bread and salt. Some formed military forces to fight alongside the Germans. But the Germans did not want the Ukrainians, whom they regarded as subhumans, like the rest of the Eastern Europeans. The Nazis drove the Ukrainians, and other Soviet peoples, back to the side of the Russian empire.

In Latin America and the Carribean, there was a great deal of pro-Axis or neutral sentiment, in opposition to U.S. imperialism. There was an anti-draft movement in Puerto Rico (subject to the U.S. draft) as there was in Quebec.

Within the U.S., there was dissatisfaction with the war among African-Americans. For the U.S. to tell Black Americans that it was fighting for “freedom” and “democracy” was a hard sell. Polls

showed that most African Americans did not believe the democratic claims of the U.S. government. (See Malcolm X [1999], for his account of how he kept from being drafted by acting “crazy.”) Others supported the war, under the slogan “Double V for Victory!” which was raised for awhile by Black newspapers. It meant, victory against fascism abroad and against racism at home. Black discontent was also channeled into the “March on Washington Movement,” initiated by A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The MOWM protested segregation in the military and in the arms industry. It threatened the liberal Roosevelt administration with a large African-American demonstration. (See Price 2013)

My point is to not to deny the deep evil of the Axis states, but to reject the popular image that good people everywhere enthusiastically supported the Allies in its “Good War.” Reality was more complex than that.

The Imperialist War and the People’s War

So the Second World War cannot be seen as just a good, anti-fascist, war—not without denying the imperialism, oppression, racism, and exploitation of the Allied side. But it cannot be simply described as an inter-imperialist war. Such a description, while accurate, is too abstract. There was a qualitative difference between the two sides. For humanity’s sake, it was better for the Axis power to lose the war. Enormous numbers of people saw themselves as fighting for their freedom. Nor were they simply duped into supporting Allied imperialism. The anti-Nazi resistances of Occupied Europe, for example, really did fight for political democracy, national independence, and the possibility of socialist revolution. Among U.S. anarchists, many felt “...it was imperative that the war against fascism be regarded as a two-front war—defeat of fascism abroad by military victory...” and defeat of fascism, racism, and capitalist oppression at home. (Dolgoff 1986; 114)

Donny Gluckstein (2012) suggests that we look at the Second World War as composed of two semi-distinct but intertwined wars: an “inter-imperialist war” and a “people’s war.” In Europe these two wars ran mostly parallel. The national resistances of France, Holland, Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were focused on fighting the German occupiers. So were the Soviet partisans. So were Jewish rebels in the concentration camps, the forests, and the ghettos (especially the Warsaw ghetto). So did the Chinese guerrillas fighting the Japanese. The same is true for the Greek resistance, until the end of the war when the British intervened to crush it and restore fascists to power. In the last year of the war, the Italian working class developed their own anti-fascist resistance which fought the Fascists and the German army. All these popular forces fought in collaboration with the imperialist Allied armies, with varying degrees of conflict and tension between them.

At other times and places, the “two wars” were at cross-purposes, especially in Asia (where the imperialist aspects of both sides were clearer than in Europe). The Indians, Indonesians, Burmese, and others did not support the Allies but worked against them.

“To the question, ‘Was the Second World War an imperialist war or a people’s war?’ the answer is, ‘It was both’.” (Gluckstein 2012; 212)

A similar view is raised by Ernest Mandel (1986). He divides World War II into “a combination of five different conflicts.” (45) These are:

- “1. An inter-imperialist war fought for world hegemony and won by the United States....

- “2. A just war of self-defense by the Soviet Union....
- “3. A just war of the Chinese people against imperialism which would develop into a socialist revolution.
- “4. A just war of Asian colonial peoples against the various military powers and for national liberation....
- “5. A just war of national liberation fought by populations of the occupied countries in Europe....[including] North Italy....” (Mandel 1986; 45)

Mandel’s view is distorted by his “orthodox Trotskyist” theory that the Stalinist (“Communist”) system was some sort of “socialism” or “workers’ state” (supposedly because it had collective, nationalized, property). Therefore he separates out the Soviet Union from the “inter-imperialist war.” And he sees the Chinese revolution as not only winning national liberation (political independence and a unified country), as it did, but as also having a “socialist revolution”—even if set up by a totalitarian urban elite controlling a peasant-based army and without a working class revolution. (Gluckstein correctly sees Stalinist Russia and Maoist China as state capitalist.)

That aside, it is still possible to be in solidarity with the workers and peasants (not the Stalinist government) of Russia, Ukraine, and other “Soviet” nations against the genocidal Nazi invaders. If the Nazis had won in the East, “...a German administration...could have ruled for years or decades. Millions of people could have been reduced to virtual serfdom [or killed—WP]. The resources of the destroyed Soviet Union might have ensured that the Nazis’ New Order would have survived for a generation [or longer—WP]....The human race would have been losers, since anti-Nazi resistance movements would have faced a stronger enemy.” (Drucker 1999; 137-8) The Soviet Union’s soldiers and guerrilla partisans had every reason to fight the Nazis.

Apart from his false view of Stalinism, Mandel, like Gluckstein, sees World War II as both a war among the imperialist powers and as justifiable war(s) of the workers and oppressed peoples fighting for national liberation and democratic rights, in alliance with the Allies or against them.

After the repeated defeats of the working class in the 20s and 30s, many leftists decided that, by now, if the fascist powers were going to be beaten it could only be through the armed forces of the Allied states—like it or not. This was a reasonable view. But it led most to deny the reality that the U.S.A., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union were imperialist. (In other words, because it would be better for the world if the Allies won the war did not change the imperialist goals of the Allied governments—as many radicals seemed to assume it did.) So besides being in solidarity with the Allied soldiers, sailors, and armament workers, most leftists also gave political support to the imperialist governments and their military leaders. They were then unprepared for the reactionary acts of the Allied governments after the war, as capitalist states were re-established.

Aftermath

The world war ended with the complete defeat of the Axis empires and the victory of the U.S. as the new world hegemon. The main goal of U.S. rulers had been to become the dominant world power, replacing the declining British empire, as well as the lesser European empires. This was achieved.

Revolutionary socialists, including anarchists, had hoped that the war would culminate in opportunities for anti-capitalist revolutions. There were rebellions and upheavals, and a general

world swing to the left after the war. In Europe, there were successful revolutions (led, alas, by Stalinists) in Yugoslavia and Albania—establishing state capitalism. A revolution was crushed in Greece. There were workers' rebellions in Italy and France, kept within limits by the Communist Parties (Stalin hoped the U.S. would leave his new East European empire alone if he did not challenge U.S.-domination of Western Europe). Britain elected a Labour Party government which passed significant reforms. The U.S. had its largest strike wave in its history. China had a (Stalinist-led, state capitalist) revolution and India won its independence. This was the beginning of decades of national liberation wars and revolutions throughout the colonial world (the "Third World").

Yet all these rebellions and struggles were kept within capitalist limits by their Stalinist, social democratic (pro-Western reform socialist), liberal, and nationalist leaderships. During the war, the Stalinists and social democrats had told the people to trust the imperialist Allies, to regard them as friends, and not to challenge them. This approach only prepared for the defeat of the "people's wars."

The totalitarian, state-capitalist, bureaucracy of the Soviet Union solidified its hold (contrary to the Trotskyists who were sure it would fall apart after the war). The U.S. state reorganized world imperialism under its rule. Rather than a return to conditions of the pre-war Depression, the war resulted in an extended prosperity in the U.S. and allied imperialist nations. That lasted until about 1970.

European fascism was gone (except for Spain and Portugal) and the non-Stalinist states restored bourgeois democracy in France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere. Inter-imperialist conflict continued, as revolutionaries had said it would. But World War II was not followed by World War III, mainly because the U.S. and Soviet Union's rulers recoiled from mutual nuclear suicide. (Had the rulers slipped into international nuclear war, they would have destroyed civilization and perhaps life on earth. This would have justified a worse evaluation of the victors of World War II—if anyone had been here to make it.) Smaller wars were (and are) continuous. For the U.S., the main ones were the Korean and Vietnamese wars (until the most recent wars).

The underlying problems of the world capitalist system were not solved by the Second World War: trends to economic stagnation and depression, failure to industrialize the poorer nations in a balanced fashion, real democratic self-government, ending war (including the continuing threat of nuclear war), ecological destruction, and so on. These are still with us.

Programatic Reactions to World War II

Gluckstein criticizes Trotsky for seeing "the Second World War...as 100 percent imperialist...Trotsky argued that as an imperialist war the Second World War should be opposed, but that it should be replaced by a people's anti-fascist war...[He] did not live to see that the two processes he discussed ran in parallel rather than being separated in time." (2012; 6-7) (Many antiwar anarchists made the same error.) Aside from his wrong analysis of Stalinism, Trotsky (and the Trotskyists) made two mistaken arguments against the war. One was that the capitalist democracies would turn into fascist-like states by waging the war. The other was that they would capitulate to the Axis, the way the French capitalists had. Therefore real socialist governments were necessary. There was some truth to both of these arguments. The U.S. and British governments did get increasingly authoritarian, laying the groundwork for today's "national security state." But they did not give up bourgeois political democracy. The Allies did

make deals with fascists in Spain, the French colonies, Greece, and Italy—even with former Nazis once the Cold War began. Right after victory over Japan, the Allies used Japanese troops and administrators to control the people in Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and other Asian colonies. Yet they did insist on complete victory over the Axis powers. (For discussion and critique of the Trotskyists in World War II, see Hobson & Tabor 1988, and Wald 1987.)

I do not have space for a discussion of how revolutionary socialists, including anarchists, acted in the Second World War—that is, those who did not just reject both sides and had nothing else to say, or those who simply endorsed the Allies, becoming patriotic reformists. But some radicals agreed with the great Italian-American anarchist and anti-fascist Carlo Tresca. While openly stating his desire for the victory of the Allies over the Axis, he declared that he would do whatever he could “to transform the war of international imperialism into an international civil war for social revolution—the only solution to world problems.” (Quoted in Pernicone 2010; 251)

Given the above analysis, it was necessary for revolutionaries to find ways to participate in the war, to be part of the popular struggles, without giving political support to the governments waging imperialist wars. At least, this is what they should have tried to do.

“The genocidal policies of the German government...argue[d] for pursuing...a military bloc [with the Allies]...cooperating only to the extent necessary to defeat Germany.” (Hobson & Tabor 1988; 447-9) This is “while working to spread opposition to the ‘Allied’ powers’ imperialist aims, organizing the workers, peasants, and other oppressed people as independently of the imperialists as possible, and thus increasing the chances for successful revolutionary uprisings at the close of the war.” (447) “In the colonial and semi-colonial countries....revolutionaries should have been willing to maneuver among the imperialist powers, blocking now with one camp, now with the other, taking advantage of the temporary weaknesses of the imperialist rulers to enable the colonial peoples to press their own anti-imperialist struggles.” (450-1)

In actuality, anarchists did carry out some valuable activities, of varying sorts. British anarchists put out anti-imperialist/anti-war newspapers (Freedom Press 1989). Anarchists served in national resistances. For example, anarchist exiles from Spain participated in the French anti-fascist war. Korean anarchists fought against the Japanese army.

In the U.S. (which was not immediately threatened with occupation), revolutionaries did not sabotage the war effort or organize draft resistance. But various Trotskyists, for example, played key roles in the movement against the war-time “no strike” pledge in industry—in opposition to the Roosevelt administration, the union bureaucracies, and the (by now) super-jingoist Communist Party. Others participated in the March on Washington Movement against African-American segregation in the military and the arms industry. Some were involved in the Bring the Troops Home movement at the end of the war; the U.S. government wanted to keep its military forces in Asia and Europe as long as possible to shore up its expanded empire. However, rank-and-file soldiers organized mass meetings and letter-writing campaigns to pressure the government to demobilize them as quickly as possible (after all, the war was over, wasn’t it?). This campaign had a significant impact. Had U.S. anarchists existed in larger numbers and been better organized, they would no doubt have participated in such struggles.

Conclusion

The Second World War created the world we now live in. Its aftereffects are still being felt, 70 years later. While very popular, it was an inter-imperialist war, a struggle for world domination. But it was not only an imperialist war. It also included real struggles against fascism, for national independence, democratic rights, and the possibility of socialist revolution. At their best, anarchists and other revolutionary socialists looked for ways to be part of this “people’s war,” in order to fight for international revolution. Analyzing the war, and thinking through its issues, may help to prepare revolutionary anarchists for present and future upheavals.

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