



LESSONS FROM WORLD WAR II

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This past weekend marked 64 years since the surrender of Nazi Germany and the Allied victory in Europe in World War II (May 8, except in Russia and a few other

former Soviet republics where it is commemorated on May 9). In the United States, this date generally receives little notice except on the major anniversaries; in Russia, Victory Day is the most important public holiday, celebrated with much pomp and circumstance. Yet in any country directly affected by World War II, that war holds a unique place in our collective cultural and historical consciousness—a living past that continues to influence the way we see the present.

In modern-day Russia, victory in “the Great Patriotic War” is probably the only major event of the last hundred years that everyone can celebrate, regardless of political beliefs. The war, which took up to 14 million lives in Russia (and as many as 27 million in the entire Soviet Union), and caused untold hardship and suffering to most survivors, is a sacred memory, a source of both grief and rightful pride. For people who saw the collapse of Communism and were suddenly told that the Soviet experiment had not been a glorious struggle for a better future but a 70-year road to nowhere, it means a great deal to know that their country’s role in the defeat of Nazism is still a victory they can believe in.

There is, however, a darker side to this legacy. Russian apologists for Communism use the victory in World War II as a validation of the Soviet regime—and sometimes as an excuse for the odious rule of Joseph Stalin, Hitler’s rival in butchery. In recent years, the Russian government has exploited the war to promote the image of Russia as a benign power and denigrate the claims of Eastern European countries and former Soviet republics which see themselves as victims not only of Nazi Germany but of Soviet Communism as well.

4 The glorified official Russian view of the war also ignores the extent to which the wartime suffering of the Russian people was inflicted by their own leadership. There is little mention of the fact that untrained, ill-equipped draftees were used as cannon fodder, that regular troops were routinely followed by special units which shot at soldiers who tried to retreat, or Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans were branded traitors for surrendering and often sent to the gulag prison camps for their homecoming.

But we too have our World War II blind spots—sometimes, ironic mirror images of the Russian ones. Russians commonly downplay the role of American and British allies in defeating the German war machine; Americans, much to the annoyance of Russians, often talk as if we almost single-handedly liberated Europe from Nazism. We, too, remain in thrall to the myth of “The Good War” that often glosses over some of the less noble actions taken on our own side. Even those on the left who denounce the bombing of Hiroshima and the internment of Japanese-Americans rarely mention the firebombing of German cities or the well-documented mistreatment of German civilians and POWs. Little is said about the morality of handing over Eastern Europe to Stalin, or of forcibly repatriating to the USSR Soviet POWs and other Soviet nationals who faced harsh punitive measures and sometimes execution without trial.

The “Good War,” like the Good Book, can be put in the service of any agenda. Conservatives invoke it to justify military action: “What about Hitler?” is a devastating, if cliché, rebuttal to the pacifist insistence that there is never a good reason to start a war. It is, to some extent, an unfair argument that much too easily confers the

status of Hitler on our enemy of the day. But it also makes a valid and important point: evil does exist (if usually on a smaller scale than Nazism), and to refuse to fight it is to ensure its triumph.

For liberals, particularly in response to the War on Terror and its excesses, World War II is the foremost example of how we were able to defeat a formidable enemy without abandoning our core principles, such as humane treatment of prisoners. But that is not so simple, either. After President Obama's statement attributing the line, "We do not torture," to Sir Winston Churchill, there were revelations that at least one British facility for captive Germans did, in fact, use brutal methods that qualify as torture—though probably without Churchill's knowledge. Besides, are brutal interrogation methods a worse departure from our moral principles than killing civilians in indiscriminate air raids?

- 8 Despite its darkest moments, World War II remains "the Good War"—not because we were impeccably good, but because we fought an enemy that was as close as one can be to pure evil. It also belies the popular notion that if we cross certain moral lines to achieve our war aims, we will become just as bad as the enemy: the staggering casualties in the firebombing of Dresden notwithstanding, Churchill did not "sink to the level" of the leaders of the Third Reich.

World War II reminds us about the limits of idealism. Looking back, many people wonder if we would have won the war with the level of media openness and respect for human rights that we have today. That's a legitimate question—but its seamy side is a dangerous nostalgia for a "simpler" time when soldiers could do their job without having to think of sissy stuff like rights and legalities.

Perhaps the real lesson of World War II is that a free, civilized society at war will always seek to strike some balance between self-defense and principle. Sometimes, it will err badly. To defend these errors as fully justified is to betray our own values and start on a road that leads to the kind of authoritarian mindset so rampant in Putin's Russia. To condemn them with no understanding of their context is a self-righteous utopian posture that, in the end, does liberal values a disservice.