World War II (Consequences)

Immediate Consequences

Global War

World War II was probably the most destructive war in history. In relative terms, the fourth century B.C. and the 13th century were probably more destructive than the 20th century, and the Taiping Rebellion in 19th-century China was certainly more deadly than World War II in relative terms, and perhaps even in numbers. But World War II is still considered the most destructive war in history, chiefly for three reasons. First, it was a global war that inflicted itself upon Europe; northern, northwestern, and eastern Africa; and the Middle East. It reached into the Arctic and North Atlantic oceans; the Mediterranean, Baltic, and Black seas; and the South Atlantic and Indian oceans. It spread into Australian waters, the western Pacific, eastern and southeastern Asia, the whole of the Pacific north of the Equator, and the southwest Pacific. World War I had reached China, Chilean waters, the Falklands, and the Indian Ocean, but it was primarily a war fought and decided in Europe and the Middle East. World War II was very different in terms of reach, in large measure because it was a two-part conflict.

Widespread Destruction

Second, in World War I there had been strips of murdered nature, specifically the Western Front, which had been subject to protracted stalemate. There was movement and destruction in other theaters, most obviously on the Eastern Front and in the Balkans, but also in the Middle East. But in World War I there was no destruction that rivaled the level of destruction that took place in World War II. Europe was very largely destroyed. From Brest to the Volga and from the Baltic to Calabria, the devastation of Europe was all but complete. It has been estimated that 97% of the French rail system was destroyed in the course of the war. European industry and road, rail, and canal transport systems had all but ceased to exist by 1945. In China, destruction was perhaps less total and widespread, but many provinces had been devastated as a result of Japanese military ruthlessness and wanton destruction. In Japan, American bombing had destroyed almost half of Japan's 65 major cities.

Rise of the United States

Third, the death toll exceeded 60 million, and the European total would represent one death every four seconds between September 1, 1939 and May 12, 1945. The devastation wrought on Soviet, Polish, and Yugoslav societies is staggering. But beyond this destructiveness and appalling slaughter was another kind of destructiveness: the destruction of Europe itself. For more than 400 years, Europe, the smallest of the continents, had been considered by Europeans to be the greatest, and the world had come to bear the mark of Europe in terms of overseas settlement, societies and borders, industry and trade, and science and technology. By the beginning of the 20th century, the United States had emerged as the greatest industrial power in the world, and European primacy had passed in the course of World War I. But the European empires survived that war, and in many ways Europe remained the greatest of the continents until 1938. By 1945, Europe's fate was in the hands of two powers that were not European. The Soviet Union was part of Europe but it was also extra-European, and the United States had been transformed in the course of the war. In 1939, the United States was a North Atlantic power with a continental interior, but by 1945 it was a continental power that reached across two oceans and was incomparably the greatest power in the world on two counts. First, it was the only power in the world with atomic
weapons, and it was possessed of a navy and an air force that were so large and advanced that they were literally unchallengeable. Second, in September 1945, something like three quarters of all industrial manufacture was American. In 1938, the United States had accounted for only about 32% of worldwide industrial output, but by 1945 it utterly dominated the world in industrial and financial terms. It was American money that would form the basis of the world trading system that was to be put in place over the next few years.

**Intermediate Consequences**

Allies are not necessarily friends, and those divisions and differences held in check by common need invariably come to the fore with the approach of victory. The very real danger presented by Germany in Europe and then, by 1943–1944, the American need to recruit Soviet support for a Japanese war that it was believed might reach into 1947–1948 had the effect of holding the Allies together. But in reality deep divisions and differences were already in position even by the time of Japan’s surrender in September 1945.

**Soviet Buffer Zone**

In this process, two matters were crucially important. The first was the Soviet determination to establish for itself a buffer zone throughout Eastern Europe and to hold a part of Germany as its first line of defense. After so destructive a war as the one that was then coming to an end, the Soviet intention was to secure a buffer zone of such depth that it would ensure that no future war would be fought on its soil. As the Cold War took shape, however, what in 1945 was a manipulation of the electoral processes throughout Eastern Europe became straightforward Soviet control of client states that had their own communist regimes and which were underwritten by Soviet military forces.

**Atomic Weaponry and Limited War**

The second matter was the manner in which the Japanese war ended, or at least appeared to have ended. Japan's final defeat was comprehensive and manifested itself in the annihilation of the Japanese Navy; the virtual collapse of all overseas trade; defeat at Soviet hands in northern China, Manchuria and the Kuriles; local but irreversible defeats in Burma, New Guinea, and the Philippines; and the devastation of the Japanese home islands by the American strategic bombing offensive that reached its apogee with the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The latter was to usher onto center stage something that was unprecedented. Military services had always had a deterrence role in the sense that they were state instruments capable of being used as deterrents, but with first atomic and then thermonuclear weapons, this deterrence would be ensured through the threat of the total and absolute destruction of society itself. Furthermore, the threat could manifest itself, and total destruction of a society could be achieved, in a matter of days, if not hours.

This development would not manifest itself right away, but within a very short time—less than four years after the end of the European war—the impact of developments was demonstrated in two ways. The United States and then the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) organized themselves on the basis of permanent readiness in order not to fight a war, but instead to ensure that no war was forthcoming. This was a rather strange development, but it went hand in hand with something that was no less strange. The weapons that were used to deter could not be employed in defense if deterrence failed, while defensive (conventional) forces in effect had no significance in terms of strategic deterrence. It took time for the implications of these developments to be understood, but at the same time strategic deterrence encouraged the search for other forms of conflict (that is, below the deterrence level). In terms of great powers, this search was to result in the concept of limited war, which was fitted into place in the mid-1950s in the aftermath of the Korean War.
European Integration

But there was one other development at work in these same years, but at a very different level and to a very different end. After the Thirty Years' War, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and World War I, the states of Europe deliberately sought to secure the means whereby such disastrous events might be avoided in the future. Results, inevitably, were mixed, but the limited warfare of the 18th century and then the long period of general peace in Europe after 1815 were evidence of intent and success. After 1945, however, there was within Europe the move to ensure the peace of Europe through economic and industrial integration that would prevent the European states from resorting to war with one another. There was, of course, an additional motive in the sense that for Europeans this was the means of ensuring against a resurgent Germany. In a sense, this new European integration was embodied by French foreign minister Robert Schuman—born in Luxembourg, raised in Lorraine, a soldier in the German Army during World War I, and in 1950 the proponent of Franco-German and a wider European industrial integration. This was a development unthinkable before 1939 but that was, in very large measure, the direct result of World War II.

Long-Term Consequences

The distinction between immediate, intermediate, and long-term consequences is very fine indeed, and one is certain that whatever classification one adopts is certain to be challenged and on good and possibly unanswerable terms of reference. One would suggest that the most important single consequence of the war was the emergence of the United States as the world's greatest power—industrial and financial, in terms of naval and air power, and by virtue of its possession and use of atomic weapons. It was in 1945 the only country in the world with global reach. Great Britain and France had global presence, but the United States was alone in its ability to project power across the whole globe.

The End of European Colonialism

But the citing of Britain and France, and their global presence, brings into play the subject of their colonial empires, and in this matter there were both immediate and long-term consequences. With reference to the latter, World War II saw the mobilization of the colonial empires and the raising of military formations that saw service. Both the British and the French came to be wary of committing black formations to battle because of their awareness of the fates of those taken prisoner by German and Japanese enemies, but the basic point was that the British and French colonial territories made contributions to the imperial cause in terms of manpower, economic resources, and position. For example, Kenya served as one of the bases for the British effort in eastern Africa and housed Italian prisoners, while two regiments raised in Africa saw service in Burma in 1944–1945.

World War II also saw a series of campaigns in the colonial empires: Italian Libya after 1940, British and Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia in 1940–1941, Syria and Lebanon in 1941, Madagascar and French Northwest Africa in 1942, and, of course, the whole of Southeast Asia after December 1941. In these areas, the primacy of colonial control was broken and never fully reestablished (although in Malaya the British were afforded a welcome return that was in very marked contrast to that afforded the French in Indochina and the Dutch in the Indies). But the basic point was that World War II represented the supreme crisis for the colonial empires, and the various efforts that were made in the common cause had to be recognized accordingly. The British were singularly slow to grasp this new situation, but within a decade of the end of the war the Dutch had been forced to abandon the East Indies (western New Guinea excepted), the French had experienced bitter defeat in Indochina and were on the point of abandoning Morocco and Tunisia, and the British had been brought to the brink of reality in terms of
Ghana's independence.

*Power Vacuum in the Far East*

In this sense, the European and Japanese wars were very different in consequence in one respect. In Europe the comprehensiveness of Axis defeat and the immediate reality of a new balance of power precluded further war, but in the Far East the end of the Japanese war ushered in a period of upheaval and revolution that was to last some 30 years before the local forces of nationalism and communism and great power interests resolved themselves in such a way as to produce some form of settled, recognized order. In this way, World War II was but one part of, and in its own right a major cause in, a process that saw the passing of empires and the division of virtually the entire land surface of the world between indigenous sovereign states.

*Creation of the United Nations and Focus on Humanitarianism*

The end of World War II also saw the creation of the United Nations (UN). The ambiguity of its role—whether it was there to preserve the existing status quo or to change it—was unresolved, and it was beset by Cold War divisions and the selfishness of the great powers. But the creation of new states ran in parallel with changes in the nature of the state. The lesson of World War II was that states that could mobilize in order to wage total war could mobilize in order to wage peace, specifically to fight and defeat the scourges of unemployment, lack of health care and social security, lack of educational opportunities, and bad housing. For more than 20 years after the end of World War II, these issues dominated the political agenda in Europe and North America, and with considerable success. The generation that grew up after 1945 for the most part did not know primary poverty. Things were to change with the 1970s, but by that time the process of decolonization was complete and a new world order was in the making.

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