

Codifying Our Worst Impulses: The Ideas that Started World War II

Yesterday was the 80th anniversary of the start of World War II, the deadliest violent conflict in human history. Death tolls vary, but often reach 80 million souls. What caused it? Lists of proximate causes never end, but the only credible “root cause” is simply: *ideas*. Three countries started World War II: Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union. While popular summaries rarely list the Soviets as initiators because Hitler double-crossed Stalin two years later, Molotov and Ribbentrop’s so-called Treaty of Non-Aggression Between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a Treaty of Aggression Against Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Romania. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

What ideas led the leaders of Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union to war? The obvious answer is extreme nationalism – the view *any* action is morally praiseworthy if it advances the interests of your nation-state. Heinrich Himmler said it best:

For the SS Man, one principle must apply absolutely: we must be honest, decent, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood, and to no one else. What happens to the Russians, the Czechs, is totally indifferent to me... Whether other races live well or die of hunger is only of interest to me insofar as we need them as slaves for our culture; otherwise that doesn’t interest me. Whether 10,000 Russian women fall down from exhaustion in building a tank ditch is of interest to me only insofar as the tank ditches are finished for Germany.

...When somebody comes to me and says, I can’t build tank ditches with children or women. That’s inhumane, they’ll die doing it. Then I must say: You are a murderer of your own blood, since, if the tank ditches are not built, then German soldiers will die, and they are the sons of German mothers. That is our blood. That is how I would like to indoctrinate this SS, and, I believe, have indoctrinated, as one of the holiest laws of the future: our concern, our duty, is to our Folk, and to

our blood. That is what we must care for and think about, work for and fight for, and nothing else. Everything else can be indifferent to us.

Almost everyone understands that Japan and Germany grew extremely nationalistic during the 1930s. Few realize that the same holds for the Soviet Union as well. Under Stalinism, *anything* that advanced the interests of the Soviet Union was *the* moral imperative – starting with the reabsorption of all the breakaway territories of the Russian Empire.

By itself, however, extreme nationalism need not generate war. Rationally speaking, the best way to advance the national interest is with peace and consumerism. The leadership of Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union, however, all angrily rejected this bourgeois, “shopkeepers’” perspective. Instead, they equated the national interest with the power and glory of the government – and angrily denounced Western “plutocracies.”

This was most obvious in the USSR, which deliberately eradicated the rich, business, and private property itself in order to build a totalitarian militarized society. But Germany’s National Socialists had a similar vision. Their goal was not to build an idyllic consumer society, but a mighty war machine. Unlike the Soviets, however, the Nazis had the common-sense to *harness* the rich, business, and private property rather than destroy them. As Hitler told Nazi defector Hermann Rauschning:

He had no intention, like Russia, of “liquidating” the possessing class. On the contrary, he would compel it to contribute by its abilities towards the building up of the new order. He could not afford to allow Germany to vegetate for years, as Russia had done, in famine and misery. Besides, the present owners of property would be grateful that their lives had been spared. They would be dependent and in a condition of permanent fear of worse things to come.

The same holds for Japan: Its leaders equated the national interest with the power and glory of the Japanese government, not the safety and prosperity of the Japanese people. So while the Japanese government happily used the domestic rich and domestic business, it truly bled them dry during the war. As Walter Scheidel explains in *The Great Leveler*:

Japan was once one of the most unequal countries on earth. In 1938, the country’s “1 percent” received 19.9 percent of all reported

income before taxes and transfers. Within the next seven years, their share dropped by two-thirds, all the way down to 6.4 percent. More than half of this loss was incurred by the richest tenth of that top bracket: their income share collapsed from 9.2 percent to 1.9 percent in the same period, a decline by almost four-fifths.

However rapid and massive these shifts in the distribution of income, they pale in comparison to the even more dramatic destruction of the elite's wealth. The declared real value of the largest 1 percent of estates in Japan fell by 90 percent between 1936 and 1945 and by almost 97 percent between 1936 and 1949. The top 0.1 percent of all estates lost even more—93 percent and more than 98 percent, respectively. In real terms, the amount of wealth required to count a household among the richest 0.01 percent (or one in 10,000) in 1949 would have put it in only the top 5 percent back in 1936. Fortunes had shrunk so much that what used to count as mere affluence was now out of reach for all but a very few.

What's the right word for "equating the national interest with the power and glory of the government rather than peace and consumerism"? There are many candidate labels – "statism," "romanticism," "populism," "communitarianism," "anti-capitalism." But none is quite right, so we might as well stick with the label that activists who equated the national interest with the power and glory of the government have preferred throughout the 20th century: *socialism*. Obviously, there are many kinds of self-identified socialists – including socialists who unequivocally seek a peaceful, consumerist society. Historically, however, these are rare – and since I'm not a socialist, I say that "real socialism" equals "what most self-styled socialists do when they have power." Whatever label you prefer, the key point is that all the regimes that started World War II praised the power and glory of the government to the skies – and brought traditional elites – the rich and business – to their knees. Or their graves.

Before you join me in blaming World War II on nationalism and socialism, though, there's an obvious objection: *These ideas have been ubiquitous for ages.* My response: The emotional impulses behind nationalism and socialism – impulses like xenophobia and anti-market bias – are indeed long-lived and widespread. Far more children dream of being warriors than merchants. But the initiators of World War II turned these knee-jerk feelings

into bodies of thought. They *codified* humanity's worst impulses into explicit, militant, self-conscious ideologies. And they took their ideologies seriously enough to kill for them – and often to die for them.

Does this mean that every latter-day nationalist and socialist is morally comparable to the architects of World War II? No; that's absurd. The reason for this moral non-comparability, though, is disturbing. The *rhetoric* of modern nationalism and socialism remains grotesque. Anyone who says "*By any means necessary*" is, by implication, saying, "If it takes 80 million deaths for us to win, then so be it." The saving grace of latter-day nationalists and socialists is that almost all of them are hypocrites. They may say, "By any means necessary," but thankfully few have the stomach for it. As I've said before, if your ideas are bad, hypocrisy makes them less bad.

Still, I am dismayed by the renewed popularity of nationalism and socialism. I don't think World War III is coming this century. If it does come, however, I will blame the nationalists and socialists who take their scary slogans to heart.