

Peace Briefing

What might have prevented the wars of the twentieth century?

by Kent Shifferd

The twentieth century was both a time of war and, less noticed by historians, a time of progress toward a peace system.

The development of international institutions for peace making, peace keeping and peace building such as the international courts and the UN, the perfection of nonviolent resistance, the decline in the belief that war is honorable and noble, the rise of peace research and peace education, the eventual spread of democracies and other developments all point toward a nascent peace system that might well come to fruition in the twenty-first century. Having noted this, it is impossible not to acknowledge that 1900-2000 saw the worst wars in history. What caused them and how might they have been prevented?

To begin with, we might find it useful to distinguish between the causes of the actual wars and the more general conditions of war, the culture of war that is analogous to the growing medium in which the actual wars germinate. Historians have almost all focused only on the causes of the actual wars, seeing them almost in isolation from one another as if they were entirely separate events.

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The cascade of wars grew out of a deeply embedded culture of war, a set of beliefs and values that led to the preparation for war and the willingness to enter hostilities when a conflict was perceived as intractable. The principle beliefs were that there is at some point no alternative to war, that wars are inevitable, that

they are a part of human nature, that the benefits outweigh the costs, that the killing massive numbers of civilians is a necessary strategy to win a war, that once wars break out the only thing to do is to fight until one side wins, and that young men (and now women) are in "service" when they go into the military. Another set of beliefs is associated with scarcity, the belief that there are not enough resources for all of us and what "they" get we are deprived of, hence the need for empire and the projection of power to guard, the so-called "national interest." Another set of beliefs interlocked with the culture of war is the belief that one's own civilization is superior to all others, for example the doctrine of Aryan supremacy of the Nazis or the doctrine of American Exceptionalism, which gives your nation the right to impose its way of life on others. Another feature of the war system is the blindness to the good features of other cultures and nations and to the bad features of one's own. The latter are suppressed while the former are magnified, thus distorting reality. Finally, there is great profit in selling deadly weapons, and arms manufacturers thus are pleased to perpetuate the culture of war. The culture is pervasive, rooted not only in the apparatus of the state including the military but also in the educational institutions (ROTC, the way history is taught, etc.), in the religion (God smite our enemies), and in the media. It's even found in

sports. We might even risk over simplifying by saying that the leaders and the people of the twentieth century (and many before that) just didn't know any other way to deal with conflict. Given what they knew at the time, there was no way to avoid the slaughters. Still, given what we know now, we can look

back at these conflicts and speculate about the open moments between them where an alternative course might have been pursued had they known what we know now. And that information might be useful to prevent future wars.

The wars of the twentieth all grew out of World War I. It was the great triggering event. That conflict set in motion a chain of events that led to the Spanish Civil War (a proxy war between Russia and Germany, between Communism and Fascism), World War II, the Cold War including Korea and Vietnam and the Russo-Afghan War, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the subsequent wars of the Middle East which still pollute the international scene today as well as the frightening possibility of a nuclear holocaust. What a mess! How could it have been avoided, and with it the consequent and subsequent wars of the twentieth century? Possibly nothing, given what they knew and did not know then.

World War I was, quite literally, the mother of all wars in the twentieth century. Historians have thoroughly analyzed the causes of World War I. The conventional wisdom is that the Great War was the result of multiples causes, chiefly imperial rivalries for control of foreign territory. The industrial revolution had led to overproduction which required both foreign sources of raw materials and extensive foreign markets—hence the competition for empire. The chief rivals were Germany and Great Britain, but all the major powers were involved. In addition there were the consequent nationalist jingoism whipped up by an irresponsible press, ever larger standing armies and powerful navies, the French desire for revenge for their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 in which they “lost” the territories of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany, and finally, the rigid system of military alliances which, once a minor conflict (Serbia vs. the Austro-Hungarian Empire) broke out, guaranteed a much wider war. Then there is one other “cause,” or more accurately a condition, which led to the conflict, and that was the ignorance on the part of all the leaders of the nature and scale of violence of the modern weaponry they possessed, particularly, the machine gun, poison gas, and long range artillery. This was a piece of inexcusable ignorance on the part of the leadership of the principle nations. They all thought the war would be a brief affair, like the Franco-Prussian conflict, and that the troops would be home by Christmas. By that holiday, a million men were dead and that led to another condition that prolonged the war for three and a half more years, the “sacrifice trap.” The leaders would

not negotiate an armistice at that point of stalemate because, as they said, the boys would have died in vain. So they pushed on through another forty months of slaughter. And as the war dragged on each side demonized the other. The British succeeded in labeling the Germans as the “Hun,” that is, barbarians who would undermine civilization itself. By 1917, when the Americans got into it, we were calling the Germans the “agents of Satan.” The end of the war was a result of the exhaustion of the German Empire (they ran out of ammunition). It led to a “peace” conference held at Versailles. The victors imposed a harsh settlement on the Germans, blaming them solely for the war (a huge distortion of reality) and imposing fiscal reparation which the Germans would still be paying today had it played out the way the victors anticipated. When Marshall Foch, supreme allied commander, saw the final draft of the Treaty of Versailles, he said “This is not a peace. It is an armistice for twenty years. World War Two commenced twenty years later.

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Looking back on the years 1890 to 1914, I do not see any way World War I could have been avoided, that is, any openings when they might have done things differently given who they were.

In fact, the causal chain between all the wars of the twentieth century is so strong that we might just see them as succeeding phases of the same war, a continual, hundred-years’ war. Here’s why.

The settlement left German society deeply divided between those who were (to some degree rightly) resentful and those who wanted to get on with a new world. The former, believing still in their cultural superiority, had to concoct a theory of defeat, the “stab in the back” by the Jews, a total fabrication but one consistent with a long history of European anti-Semitism. The costs of the war and then the reparations left the German economy in a shambles, leaving millions who might have accepted a just peace, frustrated, even starving. The French invasion of Germany’s Ruhr District in 1923 just exacerbated this situation. The final

blow was the global financial crash of 1929. After that, Hitler was inevitable and World War II came on its heels. Hitler intended not merely to right the wrongs of the Versailles Treaty but to set up an empire based on enslaving the Slavic peoples and capturing the oil of Rumania and the bread basket of the Russian Ukraine, not to mention killing all the Jews in Europe. He was a maniac whose rise was made possible by the mistakes of the Allied Leaders between 1918 and 1929 and the long history of prejudice in Europe.

Another fertile development for the growth a future conflict occurred during World War I was the Balfour Declaration by which the British, desperate for allies, sought to get Europe's Jews on their side by promising to approve a Jewish state in Palestine. In the 1920s, when the British ruled that area after taking over from the defeated Ottoman, they allowed a growing Jewish settlement in direct opposition to the wishes of the people living there, the Palestinians. The immigrants promoted the myth of "A land without people for a people without a land" one of history's great fabrications. After World War II and the desire to assuage the guilt for allowing the holocaust, without by the way allowing serious Jewish immigration to the U.S. or other nations and wishing to do something about the growing violence in Palestine, the great powers in the UN arbitrarily decided to give half of it to the Jews for a new state of Israel, setting off the Arab-Israeli wars and the suppression of the Palestinian people which together are the core of the conflicts that have occurred since and continue to occur in the Middle East in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Having no ability to counter the dominant power militarily, that is the U.S. supplied Israel, many Palestinians turned to terrorism of the P.L.O., or, as they would see it, their freedom fighters. Terrible atrocities were committed on both sides.

The Second World War ended with the Soviet Union and the United States as rivals for global domination, or so they thought. Actually, the Russians were primarily motivated by keeping Germany disabled, having been seared by them twice in a generation. The U.S. saw this intransigence as the beginning a wave of Communist world domination and the international system quickly degenerated into a bi-polar rivalry that led to an insane nuclear arms race for which both sides share equal blame. Each side sponsored nasty dictators in

smaller countries as long as they were loyal to them, thus promoting civil wars and insurrections which they then supplied with arms. The final collapse of the Soviet Union, due to internal structural weaknesses in their economic system, financial exhaustion as a result of their Afghan adventure, and the nonviolent uprisings in eastern Europe left the world with a single super-power, it's national ego tremendously inflated, which believed it could shape the destiny of the Middle East. Hence the invasions leading to the catastrophe of America's recent adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of which have destabilized Pakistan, a nation bordering on the status of a failed state. All of this familiar history simply underscores the validity of "Shifferd's Law," Violence produces violence.

So much for the familiar and depressing side of twentieth century history.

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We can argue that all of these wars were the result of gigantic miscalculations on the part of the leaders of nations. It is patently true for those who lost the wars, but also for those who "won" them because the costs to the victors were so great. Even the Allied victory in World War II left the British and French bankrupt with their empires coming down around their ears. Together with the Americans they suffered huge casualties and these were dwarfed by the deaths in Russia. (As the old Scottish anti-war song says, "Some lost the battle, their bodies fell. . ."). As many as one hundred million people died in World War II. And the world was left with the nuclear monster and an incalculable waste of resources and lives in the Cold War between the two big victors. Some twenty-five million people died in the proxy wars fought in Central America, Africa and the Middle East. The U.S. actually became directly involved in Korea and Viet Nam and the Soviets in Afghanistan. The cost to the world of this failure, both in terms of the resources that could have been used for development and the actual destruction, has been and continues to be enormous.

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been prevented, had we known what we know now?

If the leaders had known that the war was going to last 4 years and that 8-10 million would die, would they have not gone forward? I don't know. Given the fact that we now know, that hundreds of millions would die in a nuclear war, we have none the less not given up nuclear weapons and they are slowly spreading to more and more nations. But we are inured to much greater levels of violence than were the leaders and masses at that time (having been through World War II and the prospect of nuclear holocaust.) They might have found a diplomatic solution had they known the cost ahead of time, but that doesn't do us much good at this time. What if the masses had not been subject to the jingoistic nationalism that was whipped into a frenzy by the irresponsible press? How do we strengthen the "other voice" in today's press, get the critique of war and the alternatives of nonviolence and international war-control institutions into the popular mind?

If there had not been colonial empires and unconquered land left for more of the same, there would have been no imperial rivalry. Today, overt political empires are taboo and most of the world's peoples have won political independence. But there is more than one way to do empire, and the U.S. has pursued neo-empire not by ruling over people but by setting up a global financial system (the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization and so-called "Free Trade" agreements). Neo-empire guarantees that wealth will flow out of the global south into the global north, and just to make sure of the stability of these institutions, the U.S. continues to support repressive regimes (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel) and to have troops in 148 countries around the world. There are three things that make the continuation of this situation problematic: nonviolent resistance as in the Arab Spring, the immense fiscal cost of projecting power globally, leading to a huge debt and growing anger among the middle classes in the U.S., and the emerging ecological crisis undermining the supports provided to the economy by the biosphere. Only by allowing people to develop freely, without so called "austerity measures" can the aspirations of the people in the global south be realized. And this can be achieved only by reigning in the power of the multinational corporations which have come to control the U.S. government. This will only happen by the rise of people power, exercised we fervently hope through nonviolence, lest we fall into the trap the Russians fell into in 1917.

The road to peace in the twenty-first century travels through economics and the state. To prevent WWI it would have been necessary to dismantle the imperial system. From that we can learn lessons for our own time even though the shape of empire is different.

World War I was preceded by an arms race in terms of warships, long range artillery and the build-up of standing armies. It is impossible to ascertain to what extent this contributed to the outbreak of the war. Did the military aspire to see how their weapons would work? Were they a little more reckless because they had confidence in their technology and troops? One thing is for certain. These new weapons, massed on the battlefield, made for far greater slaughter. "Progress" in the development of weapons does not bring security—it must make for worse wars. And one can never "get ahead" of the "enemy" for long as the sorry history of the nuclear arms race convinces us. At any rate, a great draw down of armaments of all kinds, including an end to the international arms market (the U.S. is the leading purveyor) would surely enhance the prospects for peace. We must begin with a comprehensive nuclear test ban and the elimination of these horrific engines of destruction.

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Jingoistic nationalism, the belief that one's nation is a paragon of virtue, the leading edge of civilization, and invincible, in part led to World War I. The basic division of the world so many people make in terms of "us" and "them" is a chief enabling condition of war. And the attitude that if you are not with us you are against us (an inversion of what Jesus actually said which was those who are with us are not against us) remains all too prevalent. On the street we hear of "towel heads" and "sand niggers" and other language dividing us, who are all virtue, from them who are all evil. The intellectually unsupportable doctrine of American Exceptionalism, which ignores the good in other national cultures and the evil in our own, is a war enabler. And for the last ten or fifteen years we have begun to hear about a conflict of civilizations between the "West" and "Islam." It's nonsense. Stopping it will enhance the prospects for peace. To do so we need to be

less ignorant. Unfortunately almost nothing is taught in our K-12 system about Islamic history and culture and the situation in college is not much better. Educational programs and media campaigns to simply inform people about Islamic culture in all its broad array including those things which are reprehensible will help. And, if we are really bold, we will remind ourselves that our history is replete with genocide and slavery and in the 20th century the support of dictators and their death squads, and too that we are way down the list in terms of infant mortality and lots of other indicators of well-being. We have some work to do in our own body politic.

Another triggering cause of World War I was the system of entangling alliances. In an effort to secure the peace by means of deterrence, the “great nations” arranged two great alliance systems in the hope that each, seeing the combined strength of the other, would never think to attack. What actually happened was that the system guaranteed that a small conflict would inevitably escalate into a major one. From the immediate post-World War II era until 1989 we were again in such a situation but the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 ended that grim posture. Unfortunately, NATO never dissolved as it should have. The problem with deterrence as a means of keeping the peace is that it only lasts as long as it lasts. Shifting power relationships, driven by economic and technological change, shift the balance of power and then one side may just try to create a new world order. It also relies on each side being rational, which is a slim hope. Far better a peace guaranteed by an end of militaristic values, strong international institutions, nonviolence and citizen based defense, and a just and equitable distribution of the world’s wealth and prosperity founded on a healthy global biosphere.

After World War I there was a cultural revulsion against war best exemplified, I think, by Erich Maria Remarque’s book with its bitterly ironic title, [Im Westen, Nichts Neues](#) ([All Quiet On The Western Front](#)). Reflecting this attitude

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Woodrow Wilson’s urged his “14 Points” and the powers established the League of Nations. The League was an excellent war-prevention idea, in principle, but they were too timid to make it strong enough or even to use the powers it did have when it came to the conflicts of the 1930s (especially Japan’s attack on Manchuria and Mussolini’s attack on Ethiopia). Too little, too late. And Wilson’s point about “national self-determination” (rising I suspect out of the triggering event of World War I, the attempt to suppress the desires of the Serbs for a state of their own), actually led in the opposite direction toward more conflict since there are far more nations than states. If peoples of different ethnic groups cannot live together in a modern state, then the conditions of civil war are always present. In any event, the victors and losers of World War I did not try to abandon the robust war system; they just created a very weak peace system along side of it. That did not work. National militaries were still glorified and violence was still considered to be redemptive.

So much for World War I. We will never know how history would have played out had it not occurred. What about World War II, which really began with the Spanish Civil War in 1937? Certainly we have learned that one-sided, dictated “peace” treaties do not work. We at least exercised that knowledge at the end of World War II with the Marshal Plan, a brilliant example of enlightened self-interest. (Would that we would apply such a principle to Israel-Palestine.) Could we have prevented war in 1939 by going to war in 1938, that is, by not “appeasing” Hitler at Munich? No one knows what would have happened had Neville Chamberlain stood up to Hitler and joined with the Russians in opposing the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Certainly the British were not ready to fight and had a war begun they may well have lost the Battle of Britain. In the months gained by the much maligned treaty (maligned mostly after the fact), they built hundreds of Spitfires and Hawker Hurricanes which turned the tide in the great air battle of 1940. And even if Hitler had backed down at Munich, does that guarantee that he would not have attacked Poland 1939? This was not an open moment in history for making peace. World War II was inevitable, given what preceded it. But 1945 was a huge open moment, a great turning point where we failed to turn, although we tried.

The United Nations was a great improvement on the League, but again it was too little, too late, and the national war-making institutions were not dismantled. Those who had an upper hand

wanted to keep it. In the U.S. we began speaking about “The American Century,” a euphemism for world domination. The greatest opening after 1945 was the chance to turn over all fissionable materials to the UN. We came close, but the U.S. and the Soviet Union balked in the end. Each side feared the other.

Fear plays a big role in maintaining the war system. This fear is based on reading the past and projecting it into the future, what I call the “historic fallacy,” namely that the future must mimic the past. It goes like this. The past amply demonstrates that nations have used violence against each other and, if we are prudent, we will be prepared to ward off such an attack on us by having superior military power. What is more, for the Americans and Soviets, it worked as they emerged from World War II victorious, unconquered. It is logical, but dysfunctional. It may make sense to an individual nation but

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overall it does not work because striving for superior military power creates mirror actions in other states who know from bitter experience to fear states that have superior military power. This is the do-loop the world is stuck in. And the worse the violence the less are nations able to even hold a discussion about alternative methods of achieving security. Those who raise such possibility are quickly accused of being naïve and unrealistic. (A crude expression of this often heard is, “Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death I will fear no evil, for I am the meanest S.O.B. in the Valley.”) In other words, “Peace through strength.” It works sometimes for some nations, but only temporarily; dominance cannot last indefinitely. All powerful nations decline. What’s more important, it does not work for the system, for the world as a whole, which is to say it does not work for the world’s people.

I don’t know that we can say that there were many real openings for peace in the twentieth century. What we can identify are the mistakes made. In terms of actual wars, the Balfour Declaration was a huge mistake, as was the dictated “Peace” of Versailles. The construction of a too weak League, and later a still too weak

U.N., were also great errors, as was the failure to bring nuclear weapons under international control. (The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty also suffered from a built-in error, the assumption that the nuclear powers would in fact keep their end of the bargain and give up their weapons if non-nuclear states promised not to acquire such weapons.) Beyond the specific mistakes there is the historic fallacy which still guides the leaders of nation states. Politicians are slow to learn if they learn at all.

Having said this, we need to recognize that more and more people are learning about alternative methods of conflict management. We know what we need to do to strengthen the UN, we know from tested experience how to employ nonviolence, and we know that we live on a tiny, fragile planet that is only further endangered by the military mode of trying to achieve security. We know, or many of us

know, that if we are going to have peace with the planet we must make peace with each other, and if we are to make peace with each other, we must make peace with the planet, that is preserve and share its resources with each other and future generations. And that means learning a new kind of prosperity which does not rely on the massive economic growth that depletes and degrades the planet’s ability to support civilization. So things are changing and in the right direction. A culture of peace is emerging. It is our sacred obligation to further it at every chance lest we once again descend into world wars that, this time, will end the world.

We can do it.

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