

# **From Plato to Putin**

*A Short Guide to the Question of War*

By

**Andrew Sangster**

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# Foreword

The Revd. Canon Dr Peter Doll

Warfare is a notoriously difficult subject for people to get their minds around. Everyone knows that it brings out the worst in human beings, is destructive of human life and civilisation and wasteful of precious natural and human resources. It engenders cruelty and debases all those who are touched by it. We human beings pride ourselves on our rationality. We know that war is a terrible thing, and yet, generation by generation, human beings continue to choose to make war, continue to dream (contrary to all the evidence) that something lastingly positive can be accomplished by it. It is difficult to come to any conclusion other than that violence is deeply rooted in human nature and is in that sense a 'natural' or 'normal' part of life. Inhumanity is an integral part of being human.

Although warfare is in this sense 'normal', political, and military leaders by-and-large don't want to have the reputation of being warmongers; they look for excuses to explain why they have no choice other than to make war or why the war they want to fight is morally justified. Andrew Sangster brings to this 'Everyman's Guide to War' an unusual but valuable combination of his expertise as a military historian and his moral sensibility as a Christian priest. He registers the importance of understanding the arguments of political and military necessity that lead to war, of recognising the human skill and ingenuity that go into warfare, and of articulating moral despair that human beings cannot break themselves of the instinct or habit of making war.

Because warfare is a constant in human affairs but is also recognised as a moral evil, some of the greatest minds in history have sought to understand why human beings fight, to ensure that wars are begun only for just and moral reasons, and to provide rules of civilised conduct ensuring that war's impact on innocent civilians is minimised. Plato and Aristotle argued that war could be justified on the basis of just political ends, while Thucydides recognised there was only one reason for war – the expansion of power. St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas formulated what is known as the 'just-

war theory', that war could only be a last resort, in order to counteract evil and suffering. Leaders still appeal to these and other ancient authorities to justify their actions and always claim a determination to protect civilian life at all costs, but the reality is that power politics and military necessity almost invariably trump moral restraint, no matter who the combatants may be.

In the brief span of his 'Everyman's Guide', Andrew Sangster makes accessible a remarkable range of original sources and recent scholarship while being always grounded in the nitty-gritty reality of politics and combat. Although he brings the story right up to the present day, he gives us no reason to think today's leaders are any more astute or moral than their predecessors. It may seem remarkable that after 2000 years of Christian history and influence he should conclude that 'the only hope is to try and love our neighbour'; we might reflect on this bearing in mind the saying of G. K. Chesterton, 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.'

## Preface and Introduction

Having written many history books on 20th century history it struck me one early wet morning while listening to the radio news about the war in divided Syria that ‘nothing changes under the sun’.<sup>1</sup> A phrase which epitomises the findings of this exploration. I reflected that there has not been a period in recorded history without conflict and war. I went to my library shelves and started reading from the Oxford Readers publications about war and immersed myself in a variety of books dealing with morality, jurisprudence, and although having a degree in theology and law found the issues complex in the way they were expressed. Many of my history colleagues expressed the same feelings and it dawned on me to write a short book with a style of expression which could be easily grasped, with useful historical events to illustrate the various arguments, thus the title ‘everyman’s guide’.

My first thought was to explain some situations by comparing an international conflict to a personal domestic situation such as neighbours quarrelling over land ownership, and although this was occasionally a useful device it was not always reliable. When it came to explaining the nature of defensive wars and the use of pre-emptive strikes, wars of prevention, and wars of intervention the only way to illustrate the issue in hand was to refer to actual well-known events from history, and when possible, from recent times.

I felt compelled to keep reflecting on the fact that it is the nature of man which causes war, and this created the first chapter. This caused speculation as to the intrinsic nature and idiosyncrasies of Homo Sapiens, with the initial features of our behaviour as from the time when we first left our caves. The fact that we became the dominant species on our planet against other forms of possible human species and all animals could not be ignored as to why. This of course had to be based on common sense

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<sup>1</sup> Bible, Ecclesiastes Chapter I, verse 9, (King James Version) ‘The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun’.

speculation but as honest as possible, almost like a spiritual self-examination. This had to be followed by a brief exploration as to how humankind views itself in terms of national identity, as the problem of human behaviour becomes critically important in terms of war at a national and personal level. Individuals are brought up in an atmosphere of what may be called the corporate memory which tends to identify us and our nation and can sometimes dictate our future. The overall history of a nation has many ramifications, but most especially the recent events which pervades the current generation. Nations can sometimes be similar in outlook, but when they differ, it does not lead to living in harmony and war frequently occurs.

War has been the subject of intellectual, religious, and moral discussion since recorded history. It took months of reading the works of early writers which were complex and intellectually challenging, so I took the decision not to avoid their wisdom but to briefly summarise it for the benefit of the reader and not leave a mental fog and sense of boredom, keeping the chapter as short as possible.

The one way to avoid war is to refuse to kill and the idealistic arguments of pacifism are explored and questioned in terms of the pragmatic needs of sheer survival. This is contrasted with what is called political positivism which demands that a balance of power is necessary, and pragmatism or expediency must come before any other consideration. Pacifism demonstrated a high moral stance whereas political realism appears somewhat uncompromising and even cynical. Having introduced two extreme views of war it was necessary to spend a chapter having a brief exploration of the modern era as from 1900 to the current day (2022), not only because context and circumstance have changed and continue to adjust, but the memories of the last 120 years make us what we are today in terms of identity both as nations and individuals.

The next chapter raised the question as to when war can possibly be justified, and the only answer agreed to since the beginning of written records is that of a war of self-defence, despite what pacifists may think. However, this simple argument of self-defence is unsurprisingly not straightforward, as many argue a pre-emptive strike maybe self-defence



which is possible, but caution is critical, as it can be used as an excuse for a war of aggression. A war of prevention has been described as defensive, but this is highly suspect as it relies on political speculation. Wars based on intervention for humanitarian causes may have some justification, but there is always the danger of abuse. Finally, the question of terrorism is raised to explore any sense of justification both in its causes and defence against this mode of warfare.

The rules or conventions of conducting war are explored, there are many international agreements on this vexed issue which are often ignored both on the battlefield and at high command level. The central rules of conduct tend to be focused on the treatment of prisoners of war, killing non-combatants and the innocent with the arguments that not all non-combatants may be innocent. The question of torture and suicide missions are examined as well as human-rights. The issues of sieges, blockades, sanctions, hostage-taking, reprisals, guerrilla warfare are all explored alongside the perennial issue of military necessity overriding rules of conduct.

Finally, the postwar scenario is examined and whether it can bring peace and stability after years of destruction and hatred. The various trials such as Nuremberg and others which followed WWII are explored, as well as the South African Truth and Reconciliation scheme as to whether it has anything to offer as a way of hope for the future.

Perhaps the most perplexing and intellectually contentious issue to be explored was that relating to the viability of international law and moral principles being of any value in avoiding war. This chapter concluded that international law is far too lightweight to be of value as it lacks the authority of the municipal law of sovereign states. Morality systems have much to offer but there is no universal morality as there are many different viewpoints in various religions and cultures. The only hope is what is described as natural law which was first indicated by the earliest ancient philosophers that there is an almost inbuilt instinct in humankind that some deeds are simply wrong and unjustified. The problem with this lifeline is that human beings have free will and breaking domestic law is as common as breaking international law and even promises made in treaties and pacts.

The book was originally intended to finish with this chapter, but because of current events the final chapter looks at the issue of today, first at the responsibility of what may be called significant non-combatants who are not so innocent, followed by the sheer number of wars taking place in the last two decades to this day, many not in the public eye. A brief evaluation is surveyed about world tensions, including the dangers of what may be termed as rogues states such as North Korea firing missiles in every direction. There is also a state of nervous anxiety over China's claim in Taiwan, a small island with American support indicating a possible military clash between two superpowers. Finally, the war in Ukraine, the nature of the leaders and reasons for the war, and the various arguments relating to justification mentioned in this study. The inevitable conclusion is somewhat depressing because from whatever angle war and its conduct is explored, war inevitably persists and reoccurs, and rules of conduct are too often ignored. The sadness is that 'nothing changes under the sun' when it comes to humankind's behaviour.

# Chapter One - Humankind

There are aspects life on earth which can be disastrous and even challenging to the existence of human life, such as earthquakes, floods, and even an asteroid hitting earth which is often speculated as being the cause for the disappearance of the dinosaur age (Mesozoic period), causing NASA to explode a bomb on an asteroid to see if it could be deflected (26 September 2022). Active research continues to establish how long dinosaurs existed, but it is generally believed their timeline will be millions of years longer than humankind can manage. Climate change is itself a danger which can only be remedied by international cooperation which for many seems farcical, but the other danger is a nuclear war. In 1989-90 when the Cold War ceased it was hoped that this scenario had become an anachronism, but with Putin's war in the Ukraine it is known that fingers are again hovering nervously over the nuclear buttons. It raises the question as to whether there is any point in trying to form legislation to stop war because it is as inevitable and unstoppable as natural disasters.

The question must be asked what is it in human nature which throughout the centuries of our existence constantly drives us to war? When the caveman emerged, like our mammal two legged cousins he probably lived in colonies surviving in small groups. Within each colony there was undoubtedly what has popularly been dubbed the Alpha-Male, one who becomes the dominant leader, who on seeing outsiders coming into the valley felt they were trespassers on their territory and thus emerged the first signs of land ownership. The trespassers would have been ejected or utilised to grow the colony, which community when large enough would occupy the next valley and hills because they offered greener or better hunting grounds.

The writer Yuval Noah Harari in his book on the history of Sapiens indicated that Homo Sapiens was not the only species of what we now call humans.<sup>2</sup> He explained there were at least six different species with

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<sup>2</sup> Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Harvill Secker, 2014)

DNA being utilised to track original sources. Whether other species such as Neanderthals or Denisovans merged with our version of Homo Sapiens or not must remain speculation, but over a long period of time Homo Sapiens appeared to become the only human species. Today humankind can be over-sensitive to skin, eye, and hair colour, and it may well be, as Harari suggests, we were the winners in an elimination process. The migratory movements from the African continent continued raising questions as to why Homo Sapiens was successful. One proposal has been that although many animals of all sorts can communicate with one another, Homo Sapiens through a possible brain pattern developed better communication skills, or he may have been more ruthless.

All this must remain curious speculation, but there is something in human nature which is best understood by the swing of a pendulum, a human can rapidly move from being a cooperative kindly soul to being a ruthless killer. From before the time that Cain killed Abel, and from the earliest recorded history of the human species the need for power, dominance, wealth and therefore greed have been hallmarks of humankind, often called 'original sin' by Christians. As will be noted in Chapter Three the ancient Greeks noted this inbuilt propensity in human nature, with Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle regarding war as originating from humanity. Furthermore, Thucydides thought it so deeply rooted that it could not be prevented or contained.

As a local community grew in power, be it a Greek city-state or a nomadic tribe seeking better pastures and more dominance, these were often the motivating forces for war and the massive migrations across the continents and seas. Seeking resources and better living circumstances, sometimes moving on and eventually settling in a selected spot which became their country led by the more powerful or charismatic warriors of the day. As Michael Howard wrote, war, conflict between political groups 'has been the universal norm in human history', and some societies were more warlike than others, 'for some almost as rite of passage'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, Michael, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London: Profile Books, 2001) p.1

Leadership was often associated with an overlord or monarchy and supported by other lords claiming noble rights, frequently backed by a religious faith and a military force. From recorded history's earliest times, the settled community in its chosen home of 'milk and honey' was led by the warrior class, namely the origins of the aristocrat, prepared to enlarge its power by conquering neighbours. In Europe much of this was personified by the wandering tribes looking towards the fertile lands of the west, with war acknowledged as an inherent part of human life. They took land, claimed possession by force of arms as there were no property laws. They were not nomadic tribes in the sense of wanderers seeking a living in the deserts of the world, but intent on staying, using agrarian skills, and although Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in his 1840 book on property described 'property as theft' no one would argue with seasoned tribesmen like the Vikings. The territory became their land and needed to be defended from others.

The issue of war was in the hands of the leaders who either obliged or convinced their people to fight for their possessed land, undoubtedly true from the earliest to the most recent of times. War was in the hands of the princes not necessarily the people at large who may have preferred to stay working at home. The Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz after the Prussian defeat at Jena (14 October 1806) by Napoleon noted that 'the people ruled by the Hohenzollern monarchy observed the defeat of the royal troops with indifference', noting the separation of people from their government.<sup>4</sup> Today, if the news is correct, the Russian leader Vladimir Putin in recruiting troops to fight in the Ukraine is facing opposition by many citizens. As the ancient Greek historian Thucydides suggested, the justifications for war are lies that politicians tell their citizens playing on their sense of honour, greed, and fear. In a defensive war the inhabitants often prove more willing, and many might be prepared to fight in the hope of gain, especially seeking a new homeland in better climes, but it starts with the leaders and high command. Even in this modern-day land and resources, be it oil, gas, or water remain an issue.

As such it was the despots and political leaders, and sometimes the military command who initiated aggressive war, leading to the rise and fall of

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Michael, *Clausewitz, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2002) p.18

empires. In the Middle East, Egypt was powerful, then Syria, then the Assyrian empire, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and Romans all an onward roll of rising and falling power. In Europe invading tribes grabbed neighbouring lands, fought off intruders, or as with the Vikings some were allowed settlement rather than engage in more conflict. The greed and power seeking of the various types of despots was all part of humankind's nature, and with the passage of time many were consumed by larger neighbours and as with other parts of the world, the Middle East and Far East empires continually rose and fell in the constant see-sawing sway of power.

From the milieu of warring for land based on rights, inheritance, and sheer greed, evolved a pattern of recognised states. There is a generally held historical view that at the conclusion of the notorious bloodthirsty Thirty-Years War the Peace of Westphalia (October 1648) legitimised the state which had its own rights and control of its borders and domestic behaviour. It also produced the pattern of the *ancien régime* of monarch, church, and aristocracy a hallmark for centuries in most European states. Countries differed in their development with France attacking the system in the 1789 Revolution, in England the aristocrats all but destroyed themselves with in-fighting which was followed by landowners and merchants producing a bourgeoisie culture. There was always war, either civil or international, the continuing characteristic of humankind not just in Europe but globally.

Historians have in European history given names to the various periods of history, the Dark Ages, Medieval period, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, most of them couched in positive terms. However, in terms of both Eurocentric and global history such is the nature of man the title the 'Pursuit of Power' is more applicable, a title the historian Richard Evans rightly gave to his study of Europe between 1815-1914.<sup>5</sup> This may be regarded by some readers as too cynical, but not a century of recorded history has passed without international conflict, civil wars, and revolutions. There was an era known as the *Pax Romana*, roughly two hundred years when the power of Rome suppressed other contenders, but

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<sup>5</sup> Evans, Richard, *The Pursuit of Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2017)

the migrating tribes still hammered at their doors until the Roman fabric collapsed.

Countries took shape and became recognised states, with systems of governing evolving which were based on varying ideologies based on previous lifestyles, the most common being known as the *ancien régime*, then developing democracies often called the liberal development, various shades of communism, totalitarianism, and some places based their state governance on religious faith. Humankind's characteristic need for power has continued unabated with empire building, colonialism, nationalism. These motives were often a political drive supported by excuses that in occupying another land the aggressors were bringing civilisation or a better religious faith to the conquered. Clausewitz noting that 'war was nothing but the continuation of policy with other means', indicating that 'war cannot be divorced from political life'.<sup>6</sup> Wars persist to this day based on questions of territorial integrity, justifying expansion, religious faith, ideology, mutual safety, often a sense of fear of a neighbour, and many other reasons purporting the justification for attacking our neighbours.

It has been suggested that such is humankind's development that war is as inevitable as natural disasters and plagues, and conflict will never cease, others that some form of international system can 'outlaw' war, but as we progress through the 21st century with the increased dangers of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) such as nuclear power, bio-chemical warfare the stakes have become dangerously high, challenging the existence of humankind and the planet, demanding more attention to the possibility of living at peace in our global community of nations. War is generally acknowledged as dehumanising, albeit a common human activity, but most agree it is evil and leads to unbelievable suffering and many have tried to draw attention to the dangers based on the premise of morality or natural law which will be explored in the penultimate chapter. Clausewitz wrote that war was 'composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force' which he could have added seems a characteristic of humankind.<sup>7</sup> This book will try

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Michael, *Clausewitz*, p.36 and p.52

<sup>7</sup> Howard Michael, *Clausewitz* p.76

and outline and re-awaken the main issues because as man has advanced scientifically and technologically, the inevitability of war and humankind's propensity for playing Russian roulette must be recognised as a danger best avoided.



## Chapter Two - Collective National Identity

This book seeks to explore the morality of war, if war can ever be justified and, if so, under what circumstances. As a published historian it seemed right to insert a chapter on the way we remember the past and its wars, and the value and flaws in writing history, as it impacts our current thinking personally and as a nation. A national identity is often based on the collective memory, which is moulded by widespread views of the past gleaned from history books, films, and the media in general. History writing is often open to political manipulation, and not always reliable or easily definable, and constantly varies in analysis. Although a country's long-term history may have some bearing on the collective memory, it undeniably focuses on events of the previous 70-80 years as a generation span. Parents who fought or lived through WWII would impart their views to their children so the generational span can reflect a long period of time.

This British writer, born on the day Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviets remembers playing on the bomb sites in Dover, and can recall the hatred felt against the Germans, the Japanese were never mentioned, and the adults talking about lost friends relating the tragedy and pain of war. It was soon that films of heroism and romantic views of the war were being shown in the cinemas, and it was not until early history books appeared that as a teenager a more informed picture of war was conveyed. Films and journalists were a source of information and emotions, but it felt acceptable to think an historian was always right. A friend of the same generation recalled being informed that Britain had stood alone and won the war, with some belated help from the U.S.A. There was little mention of the Eastern Front, nothing of the Holocaust. Jerries and Krauts were bad guys and Brits were good guys, and he and his friends read a magazine called *RAF Flying Review* which described heroic deeds by people like Douglas Bader and Robert Stanford-Tuck. He also recalled that on looking back his parents wanted to consign WWII to the past, but he also heard about the bombing of some nearby neighbours in the town of Bath and knew his uncle had been a prisoner of war.

When we recall the past, the collective memory of events needs historians who either generated or confirmed the memories of the fading generation who experienced war. Often the historian can question the collective memory by the disclosure of archival evidence and with a degree of hindsight. There is always a constant flow of published literature especially on wars, but extreme caution is demanded when the objective truth is sought. Many historians seek to present their work in this light, but they are only human beings flawed with the influence of their own national background, political standpoint, and possible religious influences. Many histories cannot help but be nationalistic, therefore politically driven or motivated by agendas sometimes not realised by the historian him or herself. History helps provide the collective memory, but sometimes can be controlled by politicians to utilise in their current situation. In the 21st century there are now well over 2,000 years of human conflict to reflect on and draw some conclusions. Just over a 100 years ago this writer had three uncles killed in the Great War, relations who fought in World War II, another in Korea, and friends who battled in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan to mention just a few of the many conflicts within living memory. Each of these conflicts contains its own Pandora's box of political debate, interpretations, variations, and moral diatribes. It could be argued that the Great War of 1914-18 was the starting point of conflict, leading to World War II which more than any previous war has touched most of humankind. The historian Patrick Finney in his book *Remembering the Road to World War Two International history, National Identity, Collective Memory* brilliantly drew the reader's attention to the quagmire of historical accounts. In his words WWII 'preserved in western memory as an indubitably "good war"—a status now secured by the enshrining of the Holocaust as its defining atrocity—the conflict also continued to serve as a potent analogical resource'.<sup>8</sup>

History and national identity are crucial because of current national communities sharing a past and seeking a necessary unity in the face of possible future conflict. When a war has finished for the victors, it was a good war, for those who lost a bad war with some memories to be placed

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<sup>8</sup> Finney, Patrick, *Remembering the Road to World War Two International history, National Identity, Collective Memory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011) p.3.

on the amnesia shelf. Often the memories are adjusted to suit new developments, which was often the case in postwar 1945 Europe. As the Cold War developed German military figures such as Field Marshal Kesselring who had received a death sentence, found it quickly commuted to life imprisonment and soon released because the Western Powers needed West Germany onside against the perceived communist threat. Views on the past had to be adjusted to suit the ongoing developments in the political world. The writer David Reynolds in exploring Churchill's history of WWII demonstrated how he always had in his mind the emerging potential of the Cold War, suggesting that history often carries political influence between the lines.<sup>9</sup>

## Britain

In Britain which survived the onslaught of war and emerged as one of the victors, the popular collective memory was one of success, endurance, heroism, (enhanced by a host of postwar films) but tinged with the knowledge that Britain was a declining world power, with persistent questions over the reasons for the war and why the country had been so poorly prepared. If anything, the war encouraged a deep-rooted xenophobia about continental involvement not helped by Britain as an island with traditional insular notions. There were also deep collective memories that the war may have been against fascism but also the demand for a welfare state after two world wars, and a fairer life for those who fought which explained Churchill's loss in the 1945 election despite being regarded as a national if not international hero. In terms of any collective memory there are varying and frequent conflicting threads.

The nature of British political machinations and the appeasement years has often been a point of memory focus. The collective memory looked back with pride and a hope for a better future, but the question of appeasement in the 1930s remained a serious issue. It raised the question of who was to blame for not responding to what was now regarded as the evident threat by the Nazis. This was epitomised by the article *Guilty Men* written by some

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<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, David, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

Beaverbrook writers, which was a savage attack on those who tried to appease Hitler, who with the benefit of hindsight, was not open to conciliation or agreement. In the light of postwar years, it appeared the government had totally failed to understand what was happening across the English Channel. Postwar, appeasement was initially condemned as a dangerous miscalculation, totally unfathomable and even cowardly. Chamberlain's 'Peace in our Time' claim had initially been met with joy, but was soon regarded with mocking derision, all of which reflected the treasured sense of national identity. The postwar discovery of Hitler's aggressive plans and brutal methods put the appeasement politicians into a defendant's box, especially after the Nuremberg trials. This was first outlined by Churchill's history and appeasement was accepted by many as being dishonourable, purchasing peace at the expense of smaller nations, and in the national memory appeasement for most has become a dirty word, for others a noble cause, offering an example of conflicting corporate memories.

During the 1950s it was evident Britain was in decline, colonies were being returned to their rightful inhabitants, America and the USSR were now superpowers, all of which focused the historical memory on what had gone wrong, rather than accepting that Britain was an off-shore European island. The general public's collective memory may have differed in seeing the return of colonies as a sign of British good will and not a weakness, especially as postwar recovery was improving in their domestic improvements epitomised by Harold Macmillan's 'winds of change' speech in 1960.

One of the strands of the collective memory of the more popular mood, often utilised by politicians, was that Britain went to war to stand by others under threat, which enhanced the belief of Britain's greatness in adversity and ability to recover. The sense of British tradition, independence and power reflected the image of being the victor (rather than a survivor) in both world wars, and was utilised by Margaret Thatcher in the Falklands War, postulating the British identity as potentially aggressive and winning her the next election. Then Tony Blair took a leading role in the Bosnian-Serbian conflict and Iraq in 2003, and Boris Johnson, saw himself as Churchillian and was the first leader to support and arrive in the Ukraine

under threat from the Russian President Putin. How far the collective memory of WWII is pertinent today in the collective memory remains debatable, but it is still invoked by politicians, even during the contentious Brexit debate when the argument Britain once stood alone and succeeded; only time can tell with their use of collective memory whether their appeals were justified.

The influence of Remembrance Day which started in 1919 has grown over the years, it acts as a reminder to the collective memory of the loss of life, but also strengthens the belief that Britain eventually wins its wars, as with the sense of sadness there is always the feeling of triumph. For the current generation another collective memory would be the CND and Aldermaston marches protesting at nuclear weapons, but that has subsided despite the recent friction with Russia over Ukraine. Overall, the British collective memory tends to centre on standing alone whether against the Spanish Armada, Napoleon, or Hitler, and always winning, a dangerous interpretation of the past and too often used by politicians.

## **America**

Following the years of depression and determined isolationism America entered its Second World War after Pearl Harbor, but it had been supporting Britain against Nazism with Lend-Lease, indirect naval support, and following the Atlantic Conference a form of political support. Churchill had badgered Roosevelt knowing that the American economic and military support was critical because after the Great War America had emerged as a major economic power. Following the war's conclusion in 1945, with the knowledge of the Holocaust, the Nazi barbarities in general, as well as the aggressive imperialism of Japan the war was usually described in America as 'the good war'. Many historians and others have spent their time either challenging this concept, including the reasons for entering the European war, and trying to erase the simplification and romancing of what they regarded as the myth. The USA is a huge and diversified country and unlike the European States it is difficult to define any reliable collective memory. The resident American population hardly suffered the bitter experiences of the Europeans as the war was being fought either across the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. However, it was

accepted that the war was being fought against evil tyrannies so moral questions were not raised.

In the postwar years it was more the Cold War and Vietnam which occupied the public conscience. Nevertheless, Roosevelt's constant argument that the 1941-45 war was based on the national essence of personal freedom, elevated in American public opinion that their country was the prime global example of freedom which held firm, becoming almost an American crusade. By the end of the war America had moved from isolationism to global management. There were the usual debates as to why America had intervened but with the emergence of the Cold War, Roosevelt's views still held firm by portraying America as the land supporting freedom. There were, historically, several schools of thought, one seeing the war caused beyond America's frontiers as a threat to their security, and the second that the Axis powers had not been a major threat until American policy became threatening by offering aid to Britain. This also included an attack on Roosevelt for misleading the American people. The former more traditionalist approach tended to survive, using Pearl Harbor as resolving the problem. There were others who defended American isolationism which for them had characterised American principles, and they also criticised the Executive powers for being too far reaching, regarded this power as an attack on the democratic principles. It was also argued that the American mission of imposing their form of morality on bad nations was morally offensive. This continued as America appeared to some to be asserting itself as the prime example for the children of light, for others as asserting itself as the global policeman.

During the 1960s many of these views came under deep scrutiny, especially over such issues civil rights, racial bigotry, Cold War policies, and the start of the Vietnam War resonating in public protests and a deep internal disquiet, especially over American presence abroad. These issues almost sublimated the various shades of a WWII collective memory by challenging the role of American policy overseas. It was felt by some that by going to war against Japan and Germany, America had made itself a prisoner to areas beyond their natural frontiers. This viewpoint seemed to return to the old isolationist argument, that America could do better in passive isolation as an example for others. Many countered by claiming America had to defend the

ideals of liberty and shut the door against possible insurgence by foreign ideology or powers. This did not formulate a national identity, but it was orbiting around the issue of what America and Americans should be; it amounted to a search for a national identity especially after the Watergate scandal and Vietnam. President Ronald Reagan a Republican right-winger wanted a return to stability and wealth, and later the collapse of the Soviet Union provided a sense of victory in American eyes. The global mission, often seen by some Americans as central, took another surge of energy from the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. President George Bush started his attack on terrorists by reasserting America as the global champion of freedom with attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan. It was the old WWII collective memory, but it alarmed many with its signs of xenophobia and military power, and this was not helped by Bush calling it a crusade. When in 2004 the National World War II Memorial was opened in Washington it underlined the continuation of the collective memory of the 'good war'. This was recalling that this war was fought by a united America for moral purposes and for Americans set their identity within the international scheme. America appears to many as a massive country very much divided on many issues in terms of its collective memory. For some citizens America retains a sense of splendid isolationism recently demonstrated by President Trump and his 'America First' campaign. There are many divisions in America, the Right-wing currently portrayed by Trump's followers who see America as the global leaders, and liberal thinking Americans who demand more progress in human rights and racial equality.

For many, still reflecting WWII, there was near universal agreement that Nazism was evil and had to be fought, but it was the start of a long spasmodic war continuing to this day. America at first wanted its way of life adhered to in Europe then globally and this was very much based on the collective memory of the two world wars, giving many but not all Americans the identity of standing as a beacon of freedom to the rest of the world, and to its critics as becoming the planet's police officer.

## **Russia**

The portrayal of history in nationalistic or political terms as part of the collective memory and national identity is a common feature especially to

the main antagonists of WWII. In Russia during the mid-1930s the Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov made it clear that Russia was seeking collective security to stop another war, but the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 23 August 1939 took the world by surprise as two ideological opponents came to an agreement, not least in dividing Poland. To explain this Russia claimed it was necessary for the West had failed to join them in collective security. Such was the eventual embarrassment that the Soviets had to write their history under the oversight of their political masters. Stalin claimed, by using Lenin's theory, that the cause of the war was capitalism and its perverse ways. Later Stalin proposed the thesis that there was much in common between the fascist and democratic states and allegedly co-authored a book expounding this theory.<sup>10</sup> It was evidently the restructuring the memories of history with a powerful political motive. Nikita Khrushchev moderated this historical propaganda, but still denied the secret protocol of invading Poland. Under Leonid Brezhnev capitalism and imperialism remained the cause of war, with the old claim that Western policy had not treated collective security seriously. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev tried to moderate the past and end the Soviet fixation on the Patriotic War, but the historical revisionism was just a momentary glimpse. The critical political factor was not the Katyń massacre being avoided, but the secret Protocol over Poland as it had ongoing political repercussions, and was deeply explored by Western historians, enthralled by the political ramifications. It was the task of the Soviet historians to add support to the political demands thereby justifying their national identity. Vladimir Putin re-invigorated the past by praising to the full the 'defenders of the Motherland' with constant references to the 'Great Patriotic War'. Even to this day Soviet texts present the infamous pact and its secret protocol as being a matter of no choice under the circumstances. Since then, Putin has encouraged a revivalism of the Soviet era, adapting parts of Russia's more distant Tsarist past to re-establish the old greatness of its own form of imperial greatness. It appears with the occupation of the Crimea and the current attack on Ukraine the defence paranoia on its borders and sense of a Soviet empire have returned. It would be interesting to know with certainty how many Russian citizens object to Putin's views and

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<sup>10</sup> Soviet Information Bureau, *Falsifiers of History* (Historical Information) (London: Soviet News, 1948)



actions. In terms of this exploration, it is apparent that the collective memory of the past is focused not by the living memory but by current political motives and using the help of official historians to pave the way.

## Germany

Nazism in Germany was an aggressive form of nationalism which could be found in various shades in many countries, but Hitler's warning about the annihilation of the Jewish race and its heinous consequences has made the work of German and international historians a minefield. The collective memory and the need to re-discover a national identity presented a confusing kaleidoscope which is outside the scope of this study apart from passing observations. The Germans had suffered from devastating bombing and advancing Soviet troops to find their country occupied and partitioned with an insecure future. Nevertheless, everyday Germans needed an historical explanation to explain their nationwide embarrassment in the global condemnation of the Holocaust and others acts of wickedness within the sinister backdrop of the Nazi legacy.

Historical reasons were diverse and changed at given points during the next 75 years dependent on current circumstances. Some conservative elements tried to remove Germany from Nazism regarding it as an aberration, a time in their history when a tyrant took control, or others explained it as a rupture in German history. It was a time when reeling from WWI the poverty, unemployment which the Versailles Treaty imposed, that some German people felt they were a pariah state and for many Nazism and Hitler appeared to be the only answer as the Weimar democracy, although well structured, had seemingly failed.

In postwar West Germany many regarded the return of a democratic life as successful, but the Nazi past has remained a poignant area of interest for historians and students of politics, invoking a highly pluralistic debate. The painful memories focused on the Holocaust, the involvement of ordinary Germans, controversy over the well-known exhibition of the 'Crimes of the Wehrmacht' (1995) which hitherto had been regarded as fighting a 'clean war' without Nazi taint, and the huge national Holocaust memorial embedded in concrete and the collective memory. Nazism and the people's

failure to challenge it soon became another historical issue of debate and divided public opinion. The immediate postwar de-Nazification process only lasted a brief time, because with the emerging Cold War it was decided that a stable society on the Western side of Germany was essential. It was proposed that only a handful of perpetrators were culpable, and most Germans had been victims of Nazi terror, a choice between memory and democracy. This way the German people could blame the Nazi elite, seized upon by German and many international historians. The perceived attempt to blacken Germany's reputation during the Nuremberg Trials could be seen as a uniting call to some historians. Their arguments ranged from restricting guilt to the few, especially Hitler, to a major aberration in an otherwise normal history. There was a bolder historical effort, with some justification, of blaming the Versailles Treaty with its humiliating demands. Others tried to link Stalin with Hitler with wanting to destroy the European balance thereby casting the net of blame on a wider platform. From the 1960s the history of the Holocaust flourished (much prompted by the 1961 Eichmann trial) although the key concepts mentioned above continued in variations. The histories/accounts tended to fall between two schools of thought often dubbed Intentionalist and Functionalist approaches. The former looking towards the leader and his ideological goals, placing Hitler at the centre, the latter that this happened because of structural and economic pressure in a polycratic regime. In the question of continuity, the question was raised whether Hitler inherited the old traditions of the German past, even before 1914.

During the 1980s a degree of nationalism seemed to revive, suggesting the Nazi aggression was not that important because the war was more a matter of being pre-emptive, arising somewhat from anti-Soviet potential stirred by American wishes. Even Operation Barbarossa started to be regarded by a few as pre-emptive because of Stalin's long-term wishes to control Europe, making the Russia leader the principal warmonger.

It is known that many ordinary Germans participated in Nazi criminal activities, others remained indifferent often out of fear or pleased with early victories undoing the Versailles Treaty damage, and some bravely opposed when able. This has led to a German postwar history caught between their suffering and the guilt, a highly complex situation in seeking a new

identification for the nation, to which international history has assisted with a conservative thread to the collective memory.

## Italy

If in Russia history was controlled by the state, and Germany influenced by having to re-identifying itself as a nation, in Italy there was confusion because of the impact of their ongoing political turbulence. This writer had been reliably informed by a close Italian friend and historian that in his country political patronage is the key to historical success, with diplomatic historians virtually in the employment of the State.

The Italian war years were marked by the figure of Mussolini, the nature of Italian fascism, the switching of sides, the Salò Republic and partisan warfare were all confusing times with on-going political views to this day. In the pre-war years, despite the occupation of Abyssinia and support of Franco, many in the West continued to regard Mussolini as the lesser evil and hoped to detach him from Hitler. To this day the views regarding Mussolini as a person remain critical as many Italians feel their future has been driven by the interpretation of the past. The question often posed was whether he was a mild expansionist, or like Hitler, a severe rupture in their national history which resulted in a horrendous conflict. The past was totally ambiguous, with some claiming the anti-fascist resistance placed Italy alongside the victors because they were the victims of fascism, with others less impressed by the communist resistance. Italian politics has long been a divided scenario ranging from the extreme right and left, although the emerging Cold War influenced Italian political stability for a brief time. The right-wing maintaining a silence while the left-wing, strongly anti-fascist wanted the past to be a permanent memory but both agreeing with the continuous comparison of 'good-Italians' and 'bad-Germans'. For a time there seemed to be a reluctance for historians to indicate any enthusiasm to study fascism. What writing did appear was anti-fascist, typically Benedetto Croce who was a well-known opponent of the regime.<sup>11</sup> He attacked fascism but defined it more as a European invention, a form of

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<sup>11</sup> See Mack Smith, Denis, *Benedetto Croce: history and politics*, Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 8, no. 1, 1973, pp. 41–61.

aberration which no group had wanted, describing it as corrupt and anti-Italian. It could be regarded by some as an effort to restore Italy's identity yet did not answer the question as to why so many Italians were attracted by what fascism had to offer. This was a rallying call for those on the right-wing that fascist origins were to be found outside Italy, while others purported Italian fascism was another way between socialism and capitalism. Meanwhile the anti-fascists soon took up the expression of describing Mussolini as the Sawdust Caesar, part gangster, part clown, and warmonger. The Italian Socialist and historian Gaetano Salvemini explained Mussolini was never a great statesman, but an irresponsible improviser, half-mad, half-criminal, whose only ability was that of a showman.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand there was support from Luigi Villari who pictured him as an anti-communist nationalist, who Britain and France could have won over providing a balance which may have stopped Hitler in his tracks. There was a degree of shadowing these views among international historians.

By the 1960s, as in Germany, new scholars were appearing and with newly revealed archives more sophisticated arguments were produced, as well as the usual shifts in Italian politics which remained unsettled. This was the time of the Red Brigades and the Left-wing was followed by an anti-fascist turn in the collective memory, but soon followed by suppressing memories of the communist resistance. Each political party held their own readings of the collective memory. By the 1970s the tensions rose with anti-fascist historians stressing the barbarous dangers of the regime with its relationship with Nazism. National identity and its relationship with the past held public attention. The major historian was Renzo De Felice whose major work on Mussolini was deemed by most to be scholarly. The early volumes were seen as acceptable but later the picture of Mussolini changed, unleashing a degree of public anger, as he started to portray Mussolini as a person of some substance, followed by an effort to pass the blame entirely onto German shoulders. This debate ranged between the 'Sawdust Caesar' to a man of insight and a revisionist seeking a fairer world. In Italy (and elsewhere) the debate between a fresh style of nationalism to attacking fascism and its leader simmered on. As late as 1994 Silvio Berlusconi

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<sup>12</sup> Salvemini, Gaetano, *Prelude to World War II* (London: Gollancz, 1953)

purportedly known for his manipulation and attempted control of historians caused some to feel the taboo on fascist Italy had been broken, and even those who fought for Salò were re-invented as genuine patriots. It was regarded as a means by which the wounds and divisions of the past could be healed. The views of Mussolini received similar cross-sword views amongst international historians. Richard Overy was kinder, Nicholas Farrell described a great man who failed, but MacGregor Knox stressed that fascism meant war. In short it has been a long-term struggle over Italy's collective memory confused by current politics trying to establish their version of Italian identity.

## France

There were similar problems regarding collective memory and national identity in France, a country which had regarded itself in the front rank of nations, noted for its civilisation, liberty, a place of culture, intellectualism, and a home for refugees. In 1940 it suffered a humiliating defeat, produced the Vichy state which veered towards collaboration, was tainted by its involvement with the Holocaust, and postwar France lost its colonial importance in Indochina and Algeria, producing a sense of endemic decay.

De Gaulle had represented Free France but during the war years 1940-45 was ensconced in Britain, despised by the Americans, tolerated by the British, and in occupied France the stronger elements of the resistance tended to be communist. As such the French collective memory was as confusing as in Italy. De Gaulle as a politician made a desperate effort to restore the image of France, announcing on the liberation of Paris (the Allies out of political sensitivity standing back as French troops entered Paris) that fighting France, eternal France had liberated herself. The Free French and the Resistance dominated de Gaulle's portrayal of France's recent humiliating history as a phoenix rising from the fire and returning to its grandeur. The immediate postwar collective memory was blurred, confusing, and amnesia was widespread, but 25 years later with a change of generation this started to disintegrate, especially with the Holocaust under intense study, making Vichy's anti-Semitism and collaboration with Nazi Germany more central stage.

There arose a sense of necessity to probe the darker regions of the war years, exploring not just the weakness of the Third Republic prior to the defeat, but the role of Vichy, the Resistance all producing varying interpretations, many of them contentious. Most people accepted the sense of pre-war decadence, but the Vichy and Resistance history caused some serious upheavals in terms of the collective memory. Pétain had once been a hero but after the war became a villain as the blackness of the Vichy regime soon came under the same scrutiny as had the weakness of the Third Republic. Supporters of Vichy blamed the Third Republic and French opinion in the collective memory was as confusing as the Italian kaleidoscope and just as divided. Throughout the Fourth Republic (October 1946) and into the Fifth Republic (September 1958) the French collective memory was fragmented. What was known as the 'Gaullist myth of the resistance' with the airbrushing of collaboration continued for a time, a process de Gaulle considered necessary for the restoration of French national dignity, made more critical with the perceived demands of the Cold War. Histories were not a feature of the immediate postwar years, but there was an outpouring of memoirs by leaders of the Third Republic which were mainly self-justifying, but public memory was more interested in the heroic resistance than the 1930 debacle. When de Gaulle died in 1970 his constructed history of French resistance was soon tested.

When Marcel Ophul produced the documentary film *Le Chagrin et La Pitié* (The Sorrow and the Pity) in 1971 exposing the collaboration, the anti-Semitism, questioning the role of the Resistance, it required some serious consideration from the politicians. President Georges Pompidou the following year suggested it was more appropriate to draw a veil over the past. This was for some acceptable, for others a sense of outrage, as it seemed to produce a sense of insecurity within the national identity. The outstanding French historian Henry Rousso described these latest revelations as the glue which held the French identity together and it was giving way to more critical readings of the immediate past. This was followed by the American historian Robert Paxton who pulled no punches on Vichy collaboration, and was swiftly followed by some French historians, though most were content with criticising the Third Republic, and with a wider perspective of European political machinations. There was a constant flow of revisionist history, but the emotional and political feelings continued to dwell on the years 1940-