The role of nationalism in the two world wars

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I here focus in some depth on the causal relationships between nationalism and the two world wars of the twentieth century, asking two main questions: did nationalism cause these wars and did these wars intensify nationalism? Nationalism is generally defined as an ideology embodying the feeling of belonging to a group united by common history and a combination of ethnic/religious/racial/linguistic identity, which is identified with a given territory, and entitled to its own state. There is nothing inherently aggressive about nationalism, though it becomes more aggressive if one's own national identity is linked to hatred of others' national identities. Most scholars of nationalism would not claim that a sense of national identity is ever total in the sense of displacing all other identities, but they do tend to argue that, whether overt or latent, nationalism has dominated modern warfare. It is highly likely that a war between countries in the age of nation-states will have the effect of increasing the aggressive component of nationalism, but I am more interested in the reverse relation: does nationalism cause war? Clearly nationalism has to take rather aggressive forms if it is to do this.

This question can be first addressed by asking whether nationalism and war have tended to rise and fall together, in roughly the same time and place. There seems to be general agreement that nationalism first became widespread in Europe at some point in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, became generally more aggressive at the beginning of the twentieth century, and then spread out to the world in both mild and aggressive forms. So I initially ask whether this corresponds in any way to the incidence of wars in Europe and then the world in the modern period.

Rough statistics of war are available in Europe for the period after 1494 as assembled by Levy (1983), and these can be compared to the incidence of wars involving China and other major Asian states. Much better statistics for the world as a whole from the period after 1816 come from the Correlates of War (COW) data set, which has been refined by various authors. This data set separates three types of war: civil war, interstate war, and extra-state (i.e., colonial) war fought by one state against a native group of combatants.

These varied data reveal that for over five hundred years (indeed, probably over the entire second millennium AD), Europe saw more wars than East Asia and probably more than any other continents. Europeans were from Mars (Gleditsch 2004; Lemire 2002). In contrast, East Asia saw a three-hundred-year period of peace between the 1590s and 1894, broken only by barbarian incursions into China and five fairly small two-state wars. During the preceding two hundred years China had been at war only once, with Vietnam. Japan saw peace for two centuries until the 1880s. In contrast, the European powers were involved in interstate wars in nearly 75 percent of the years between 1494 and 1975, and no 25-year period was entirely free of war in Europe (Ley 1983: 971). Gleditsch says that from 1816 to the 1950s Europeans contributed 68 percent of the world's interstate wars. However, serious COW undercounting of colonial wars means that the real figure was probably over 80 percent (see Mann 2012: Chapter 2).

There were two long-term changes in wars within Europe. They became steadily fewer but they also became more deadly, killing more people in aggregate absolute terms as well as per war. At the tail end of the period, in the first half of the twentieth century, civilians were also being killed in much larger numbers. There was then another sudden big shift after World War II. About 60 percent of all conflicts in the period 1816 to the 1940s were interstate wars, but this fell in the 1950s to 45 percent, in the 1970s to 28 percent, and by the 1990s to only 5 percent. Civil wars now became the main problem across the world. After 2001, only the United States and its most intimate allies have started interstate wars. The European nations had virtually stopped making any kind of war.

These trends do not support the notion of any close causal relationship at the macro level between war and nationalism. In Europe wars had been much more frequent in the pre-nationalism period. The growing lethality of war, especially for civilians, might seem to offer some support for a nationalist explanation, for masses of people in different states were killing each other, and it might be argued this was because they hated each other. Yet a plausible counterargument might be that the industrialized technology of modern war enabled mass killing, and when this was extended to performing effective naval blockades and aerial bombing, it slaughtered vastly more civilians too. I will investigate this later. But today Europeans barely make war any more and yet their competitive nationalism remains vigorous, for example in sports. Indeed, very few nations anywhere in the world still kill each other even though nationalism
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(1993). Nor was the capitalist class. Capitalists were among those trying to prevent war. Nor was global imperialism responsible for war. Colonial disputes between the Great Powers were all settled by negotiation. The war started in Europe not the colonies (all this is evidenced in the final chapter of Mamm 1993).

Revisionist historians (e.g. Gregory 2003; Mueller 2003; Verhey 2000) tell us that the nationalist and imperialist pressure groups that organized pre-war demonstrations during the slide to war were outnumbered by larger anti-war protests. This slide to war was perpetrated by political and military elites. Parliaments were sometimes addressed by ministers but not with frankness. Whole cabinets were not consulted, and indeed the British cabinet would have disintegrated had British policy been fully revealed to it. Of course it remains entirely normal that decisions on war and peace are not made through any process of consultation with the masses, which is a general weakness of the “nationalism causes war” argument. There are still very few pro-war demonstrations during contemporary slides to war. Rallies round the flag come after the war has started and they don’t last long.

However, once declared, the great war, like almost all modern wars, was at first quite well supported across the classes and across most of the political spectrum (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002: Chapter 4; Strachan 2001: Chapter 2). The statesmen could lightly tug at the strings of national identities that were already established. In the second volume of The Sources of Social Power (1993) I argued that these national identities had been established by the gradual extension of power infrastructures across the territories of states. Economies, working conditions, health and education infrastructures, and military conscription were increasingly regulated nationally by the state. People were factually implicated in the nation-state as a circumscripted network of social interaction, segregated from others. They were organizationally caged.

This led to a fairly latent emotional sense of national identity encompased by Billig’s (1995) term “banal nationalism,” a secure national identity based on what he calls the “flagging” in everyday life of symbols of national identity. The flag was not so much fervently waved as just hanging there on buildings, while language, cuisine, music, and supposedly distinctive landscapes all evoked a sense of nationality. Billig says that this banal nationalism might become briefly “hot” during national crises, which in this context meant enthusiastic and confident support for the justice of the national cause, an optimistic view of the likely outcome of war, and a willingness to fight if asked to. However, in 1914 these sentiments were filtered through social structures that remained decidedly hierarchical. People deferred to local notables, women deferred to men,

has now spread to the world. Peoples still kill each other in civil wars, but their combination of ethnic/religious/regional divides make this a very different version of nationalism to that often invoked to explain interstate wars.

So I conclude from this section that a limited nationalism/interstate war correlation might be found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when nationalism rose up and the lethality (though not the frequency) of interstate war increased, but not to the further past or to the present. Its reign was at most brief, if indeed it ever did reign. I will investigate this possibility by focusing on the two most lethal wars of the period, world wars I and II.

World War I

Many scholars say that nationalism was an important cause of World War I, but all that most of them seem to be saying is that the war was fought between nations or states. Of course, most of the populations participating in World War I already felt to some degree a sense of national identity. In most cases this reinforced the state, which had therefore become a nation-state. But three of the Great Powers – Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire – were multiethnic empires in which nationalism was now playing something of a disintegrating role. We must note a further complication. The Great Powers all had empires, and so nationalist identities were blended with imperial ones and, for all except Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, this added racial identities to the mix.

Yet any causal relationship running from nationalism to war is under-cut by the fact that popular pressure was not responsible for starting the war. True, the first crisis of 1914 was precipitated by self-styled Serb nationalists assassinating the Austrian Archduke. But thereafter the downward slide to war involved tiny diplomatic and military elites with almost no popular participation in the process. The war started in the European high-diplomacy tradition with Great Powers going to war in support of small, threatened client states, in this case Serbia and Belgium, like most wars over the previous five hundred years, long before the emergence of nationalism. Three regimes were more aggressive than the others in the slide to war: Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia. But few of these three regimes, in Austria-Hungary and Russia, disliked and feared nationalism. In Germany, France and Britain, organized labor, peasants and the middle class were not generally warmongers, apart from that middle-class fraction centered on state employees which I labelled “nation-statists” in Volume II of The Sources of Social Power.
young men deferred to their elders and betters. These were half-citizens, half-subjects. So when asked to fight, they did so. There wasn’t much fear expressed in the popular press or in street demonstrations after the war began. Isolated in their nation-states, individuals experienced a brief collective surge of popular enthusiasm, a rally around the flag, partly because people in all countries bizarrely thought this war would be easy as in the adventure stories all the young men had read. Thus in all countries they cheerfully, irrationally expected to win the war quickly.

The troops left their homes in September and October shouting “Back by Christmas!” So this may have been a war precipitated by elixir, but once it began it was fought, provisioned, and to some extent supported by the masses. How and why did they sustain war, and was it for nationalist reasons? I consider first the soldiers, then the civilians.

Why did the soldiers fight?

Why did they fight and why did they continue fighting, since they faced enormous risks in waging such a war? Were they aggressive nationalists? A mixture of discipline and enthusiasm began it. Trained reservists used to military discipline could promptly enlarge the professional armies. They were supplemented during the first year or two by volunteers, a product of initial war enthusiasm. 308,000 Germans had volunteered by the beginning of 1915, while at first the British, without many reserves, relied almost entirely on untrained volunteers, getting as many as they could handle; a remarkable 2.4 million in the first eighteen months of the war (Gregory 2003: 79–80). But then volunteering began to decline. Most countries had to introduce conscription in late 1914 or early 1915. Britain was the last to move to conscription, in 1916. No country had difficulty enforcing conscription and there was little draft evasion. Only a few minority populations, such as Irish Catholics and French-Canadians, seemed reluctant. Voluntary and compulsory enlistments were quite popular for five main reasons:

1. Young men were enveloped by a militaristic culture that depicted wars as normal, honorable, and heroic. The stories read by British schoolboys were about the glory of empire and navy, and the heroes with whom the reader could identify always survived, to be garlanded with glory. Some 41 percent of British boys belonged to organizations like the Boy Scouts or the Boys’ Brigade. Britain, like Europe as a whole, was drilled. “The ‘we’ in these stories was clearly British, but there was more militarism than nationalism and British and French stories were also more racial than national, for the villains were more often colonial natives than other Europeans. When the setting was a European conflict, the enemy was normally depicted as honorable. This imperial racism related poorly to the actual war, since most of the armies were multinational. The nation fought alongside its natives, against the enemy nation and its natives. Obviously, there was some nationalism in this culture, and it was made more objectively aggressive in association with militarism. It generated enthusiasm for war, but it rarely preached national hatred within Europe.

2. Adventurous motives kicked in, in the form of desire for escape from the drudgery of mundane working-class life, and a quest for adventure among young males. Adventure was not envisaged as bringing death. This also contributed enthusiasm but it was not nationalism.

3. Recruits signed up thinking this was a legitimate war of self-defense. This is what the government and the media told them, and they had no alternative sources of information about foreigners. “Other countries had attacked us or were strangling us” (the German version), and “God was on our side.” This was a war of “our civilization” against “their barbarians,” obviously an aggressive form of nationalism, though it only appeared after the war had started, helped along by the publicity of enemy atrocities. Germans were enraged by the French’s guerillas, and then by the British blockade that starved them. Germans atrocities in Belgium and northern France enraged the British and French. Though atrocities were exaggerated by soldiers’ insecurities and by propaganda, some were real, as they had always been real in European wars.

4. Recruitment was local. British and French and German volunteers signed on in local units, most famously in the British Pals’ battalions, and their commitment was to people they knew. They were honored and partly financed by their local communities. To avoid being shamed in their community by refusing to enlist was also a motive, tinged with sexual fear. Peer group pressure to enlist emphasized the need to hold out yellow fathers in the streets to shrinks. This was local rather than national community attachment.

5. The steady pay was a factor at first, and it probably continued to be a factor among the poor, since the war soon brought full employment (Silsey 2005: 81, 123; Winter 1986: 29–33). This was not nationalism. Though some of these motives were expressed in nationalist terms, their substance had been present among recruits to European armies over most of the previous millennium: a militaristic culture, barbaric enemies,
local community pressures, masculinity, adventure, steady pay, and encouragement from social hierarchies. What the nation-state had mainly added was a centralized system of recruitment, training, and pay.

The soldiers were not initially afraid, for they expected to win quickly. But once at the front their experience was not at all like the adventure stories. Death came raining down, rarely through heroic personal combat, mostly from long-range artillery fire. It was almost unbearable to cover down before it with largely unpredictable chances of dying. Officers were convinced that the experience shatred most of their men and that only about 10 percent had the offensive spirit to attack the enemy at all. Killing was hard to do, except for those manning artillery batteries (Bourke 1995: 73). The armies maintained their cohesion nonetheless. At the front, camaraderie was reinforced by the intimacy of the soldiers' living conditions and their extreme shared experience and interdependence. A man on his own was a dead man; his unit was a support group, sometimes even a surrogate family. Again, camaraderie and hierarchy were primary, the traditional dual organization dominating warfare.

Unfortunately, there was no systematic research on soldier motivations until the World War II American Soldier studies. Volume II of that project revealed that most American infantrymen said that their primary motivation during combat derived from the strong emotional ties that developed within the unit rather than any more general social commitment, either to the army as a whole or to national ideology (Stouffer et al. 1949).

Nationalism was relatively unimportant. This was probably the case in World War I, say Smith et al. (2003: 98–100), though they also detect a process of "nationalization" occurring among French troops during the war. Since local dialect blocked communication, common French trench slang appeared while army meals forced a common French diet on men whose prior cuisines had previously been highly regional. French soldiers imbued more French national culture as the war progressed. This indicates war having an effect on national sentiment, not vice versa.

Of course, most soldiers did have a banal sense of national identity, seeing themselves as straightforwardly German, French, British, etc., though colonial troops did not, and they fought just as well. Annexes discovered through their conflicts with martinet British officers that they were not after all British, though they were fighting for the British Empire.

\[1\] This may not have been true of all World War II armies. Despite similar conditions (as influenced by American Soldier research) of Stouffer and Janowitz (1948) on the German Waffen-SS, more recent research has suggested that large numbers of German soldiers were strongly motivated by Nazi ideology. The American data have not been challenged.

The role of nationalism in the two world wars (and not directly for Australia or New Zealand, which were not threatened by Germany). The war was important for developing their distinct sense of national identity. Since almost all bought into the notion that this was a defensive war, national identities became patriotic, an appealing sentiment, though there were also allies to place in the nationalisms cosmos. For the French and especially the British, this required a switch, as the traditional enemy had become the friend. Hastily German spy stories, such as John Buchan's famous Thirty-Nine Steps (1915), emerged, peopled by villainous Germans.

There has been some debate about French soldiers' perceptions of the war. Audoin-Rouzeaud and Becker (2002: 54) argue that most French soldiers had come to believe that they fought in a just national cause, defending civilization against barbarism - a cause blessed by God, Other French historians doubt that ideological commitment was very relevant to soldiers' experiences in the trenches. Mairon (1982) suggests that by 1916 the poilus (the hairy ones, the infantry) had forgotten why they were fighting. They fought because they were told to and because this resonated amid the disciplinary hierarchies to which they were accustomed: class, state, school, and Church. He shows how in the South local hierarchies of church and state, often at ideological loggerheads in peacetime, joined together in organizing highly festive local recruitment fairs (Mairon 1982: 501–537). Apart from the involvement of schools, what would have been different in earlier centuries? European countries were still very hierarchical. People did what they were told. They had internalized the fact that hierarchy and discipline were normal, natural. Now the hierarchy was nationally organized as well as reaching down into the village. Engels Weber's classic Peasants into Frenchmen (1976) charts for us the nineteenth-century development of this.

Smith et al. (2003: 101–12), on the other hand, detect French patriotism of a more grounded type (literally) among the poilus. The poilus felt it was their job to expel the Boches from France and being mostly soil-tilling peasants, they appreciated this and required digging trenches every meter of the way. The defense of the soil of France was not an abstraction for them; it was their livelihood. They also believed that they were defending their families and communities and, misled by vague promises from above, they hoped that they were creating for their children a New France. But this nationalism was expressed in surprisingly traditional culture. During quiet times at the front they carved and molded wood, metal, and other substances into figurines and bas-reliefs, conventional icons rooted in pre-war conformities. Bullets and twisted metal became crucifixes and sculptures of the Sacred Heart, and landscapes and female nudes were painted exactly like those depicted in popular newspapers. The
French Napoleonic War soldiers imprisoned in Britain had left similar artifacts, which can be seen scattered through local museums in Britain. British troops appear closer to Maurice's routinized authority model. Though most were fearful once at the front, they had a basal sense of being British, and this included patriotism, though alongside habituation to obeying their social superiors. They were deferential to officers provided the officers treated their own authority as normal and did not condescend to them (Sears Bond 2002). These were all still hierarchical societies, now buttressed by strict military discipline. Among the combatant Great Powers, Austro-Hungarian soldiers showed the weakest commitment to the regime. By 1917 the politically conscious among the minority nationalities knew they would be better off in defeat than in victory. Yet they fought almost to the end. It was difficult to do otherwise. The hierarchies were in place and people did what they were told because that was how the world worked.

Naturally soldiers' individual motivations varied. Most tried to keep their heads down, a few were super-patriots, a few vicerally hated the enemy, others developed respect for the enemy, some remained excited by high-octane, masculine adventure, some just liked killing people (Bourke 1999; Ferguson 1999: 357–66). Their post-war reluctance to talk about their war experiences involved consciousness that their own behavior, sometimes cruel, sometimes cowardly, most often prudent, had not been consistent with supposed warrior ideals. Scholars are divided over the question of human propensity for violence. Some believe that human beings dislike violence, especially killing, and are very poor at it (e.g. Collins 2008); others believe they are capable. Whether or not violence is a natural human disposition, human societies developed elaborate social organizations and legitimacy routines that made killing on a mass scale a whole lot easier (Malešević 2010), especially in traditionally warlike Europe.

At the front there was more resignation than enthusiasm. Death and injury were substantial risks. Over half of all French soldiers were wounded twice or more. Most men were numbed, intermittently terrified, and enduringly emotionally damaged. Alcohol and tobacco helped, psychiatric medicine did not. British and American doctors recognized shell shock, the French recognized commotion (commotion or obsède (shelobites) (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002: 25), but the military and medical authorities often assumed these were covers for shirking. In World War II, combat exhaustion was thought to render most American soldiers ineffective after 140 to 180 days, and one in ten American soldiers were hospitalized for mental disturbances. In the Great War,
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Czecho-Slovenes, Croats, and others to fight for the Habsburg overlord, even to the end (Stone 1975: 254–55, 262–63, 272–73).

In the Central Powers, once it became known that the high commands no longer wanted to prosecute the war, everything changed. Released from hierarchical organizational constraints, officers and men were free to make decisions. Would the logistical routine of moving supplies and men be continued tomorrow? Should the soldiers sit where they were, inactive and confined to barracks and positions? Was there any point in fighting, when surrender was imminent? They now discussed these questions openly. Most Austrian soldiers at this point decided to stop fighting. The German Revolution started when Kiel sailors refused to sail out against the British. But regiments varied: some obeyed orders, some mutinied, but most sat still. As long as army units were engaged in combat, the command structure only rarely allowed what we might imagine to be a mass of soldiers to communicate with one another. But once organization disintegrated in defeat, soldiers and workers rose up in revolt, showing that compliance and legitimacy had been less ideologically than organizationally based.

Their risings did not lead to successful revolutions (except in Russia), while some soldiers in the defeated countries plus Italy (with its flawed victory) had quite a different response. Enraged by the organizational combination of discipline and comradeship that had sustained them during the war, and angered by a defeat they blamed on civilians, leftists, and aliens in the nation (such as Jews), they founded post-war paramilitaries which developed into fascist parties, seizing power in Italy, Germany, Austria, and eventually Romania and Hungary too. For them, militarism and a nationalism involving intense hatred of foreign and domestic enemies were yoked tightly together, fuelling each other. They were to cause World War II.

The impact on civilians

World War I has often been called a total war, and it did mobilize most of the civilian population in the war effort. To what extent did the people support a war fought in their name? It is not possible to be exact about public opinion, since there were no national elections or opinion polls, but there was plenty of censorship. If discontent was expressed, the government suppressed it. The establishment was generally loyal, for most political parties and pressure groups supported the war. There was some early positive enthusiasm for war, especially among the middle and upper urban classes, but there was also anxiety and alarm. In Britain, letters to newspapers expressed varied sentiments: Welsh writers often
lacked enthusiasm, while even many English correspondents said they would have preferred neutrality to war. They also expressed more hostility to Russia and Serbia than to Germany. The supposedly massive pro-war demonstration on the August 3rd bank holiday on the eve of war turns out to have been only between six thousand and ten thousand strong, in a London of almost seven million. War enthusiasm in Britain in August 1914 was just a myth (see Gregory 2003: 66) says British and German people felt simultaneously fear and enthusiasm, panic and war-readiness. War was most commonly seen as a necessary evil, a part of the image of war as self-defense (Ferguson 1999: Chapter 7).

This was especially true of France’s Union Sacrée, unity to defend the (sacred) nation. Becker (1985: 334) says its core was simply that France had been invaded and needed to be defended. True, this also gave the opportunity to take back Alsace and Lorraine, an issue dear to French nationalism. But on the other hand, French socialists declared that they were not fighting against the German people, only against its reactionary leaders and capitalist class. Becker (1977) examined French children’s essays and found big regional differences and more support for the war in urban than in rural areas. Popular support grew as the war began. Then propaganda kicked in, mostly transmitted through the patriotic self-censorship of the editors and journalists themselves, writing of unbroken military success laced with heroism. Eventually, the French public learned to decode the real meaning of reports like “Our brave young lads are far from beaten. They laugh, joke and sing to be allowed back to the firing line” (in Becker 1985: 38). This meant a defeat. All these victorious battles, yet the front line seemed not to move! Almost everyone wanted peace, and liberals, nationalists, and others often demanded it. But German leaders were not offering peace, and the one surviving element of the notion of a Union Sacrée was the idea that peace must not be bought at the price of defeat (Becker 1985: 325).

Many Germans later remembered August 1914 as a moment of intense national solidarity, the final accomplishment of German unification. Yet Verney (2000: c.f. Ziemann 2007) shows this was a myth. There was in fact much government propaganda. Supporters of the war were given license to publicize their views, while dissenters were censored. A carnival atmosphere in German cities lasted about six weeks and then faded. Villages were less wistful, and workers and peasants were more pacific than the bourgeoisie and the educated. The real enthusiasts were young, middle-class urban males. The first string of victories brought some enthusiasm, visible through flag flying even in working-class city neighborhoods. But the war’s stalemate then dissipated this. Germans

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who still favored the war shifted from open demonstrations of enthusiasm to grim determination to just keep on going.

What benefits Germans expected from the war differed according to class and politics. Conservatives hoped that the war would suppress class struggle by bringing a patriotic rallying around the flag and the regime. Liberals and socialists hoped the war would bring progressive benefits to the people, especially once it was seen as total war involving major sacrifice from the masses. German subjects would become citizens. Likewise elsewhere: the French hoped for a New France, and the British, a land fit for heroes. The right wing of the German Social Democratic Party had no difficulty combining socialism and patriotism. Its Center would have opposed the war had it not feared that this would give the government grounds to suppress the party. Only the Left voiced outright opposition, and arresting and sending Karl Liebknecht to the front was enough to get other left deputies to vote for war credits. It was difficult to oppose the war without embracing unpopular defections, since the enemy was not seeking peace. Only in Russia, Italy, and the United States did socialist groups stick by their principles and denounce the war. Practical politics mixed with some patriotism generally triumphed over principles. But if nation triumphed over class in 1914, as is often asserted, class immediately hit back by demanding reforms as the price of sacrifice.

Most people believed the claims of their leaders that they were fighting in a just war. Few had international experience, which might have led to alternative views. In that absence, defense of little Belgium or of democracy (Britain), or of the Republic (France), or of our rightful place in the sun or of our spiritual idealism (Germany), or even of the monarchy (Austria-Hungary) could initially justify much. Views of the enemy as criminals, parasites, or a plague grew, encouraged by propaganda. The French were seen as decadent, materialistic, and corrupt; Germans were regimented and hostile to liberty; Britons were rapaciously capitalist; Russians were corrupt Asiatics living under despotism, with a primitive religion. The Russian specter was especially useful in Germany since it could rally round Catholics as well as Protestants, and liberals and socialists as well as conservatives, while Britain’s alliance with Russia was seen as a betrayal of Western civilization (Hewston 2004: Chapter 3; Mueller 2003; Nolan 2005: 2–6, 47–60; Verney 2000: 118, 131). Again, however, this more aggressive nationalist rhetoric was the consequence, not the cause of war.

Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker (2002: Chapter 5) note that in France the war came to be seen as a crusade, a struggle between civilization and barbarity, and the enemy was believed to be committing atrocities against
civilians: murders, rapes, mutilations and deportations. There were some racial stereotypes of the enemy. Some French troops claimed that Germans smelled bad and gave racial-science explanations. Some Germans denounced the racial treason of the British and French, for in Germany it was said that their non-white colonial troops in Europe were cannibals. Isabel Hull (2005) says that the German military had already devised an institutional culture of a war of annihilation—swift, ruthless, savage in destroying the enemy— to compensate for its lack of numbers and its two-front commitment. Yet the Russian and Italian armies seem to have been equally terrible toward civilians, and all the armies raped women and shot prisoners. The British naval blockade was in some ways the greatest atrocity, probably killing over half a million German and Austro-Hungarian civilians. The collapse of animal feed and fertilizer imports was particularly damaging, contributing to a fall in Germany’s agricultural production of at least 40 percent (Offer 1983). Berlin’s mortality rates began to rise dramatically, generating an enduring demographic crisis absent from London and Paris, which saw only brief temporary crises: London in 1915, Paris in 1917 (Winter, 1999: Chapter 10). Blockading was a traditional British naval tactic in European war, not a feature of stronger nationalism. In Germany rationing got smaller and discontent greater. Police reports singled out working-class women as especially discontented, for they could not be easily sanctioned (by being sent to the front). They staged numerous demonstrations. Food shortages undercut attempts to get more women into the war industries, as did the conservative attitudes of German employers. Women were the point of a low wage if there was nothing to buy with it. Better to put one’s efforts into illegal means of getting food (Daniel 1997: 196). The result was a labor shortage as well as a food shortage. Swelling discontent also meant that the authorities felt forced to extend their propaganda and their surveillance. Discontent was not necessarily leftist. There were calls for a food dictator with the power to force internal enemies, such as farmers and merchants, into more patriotic behavior and there was little class solidarity between workers and peasants (Moeller 1996). Germans and Austrians both voiced anti-Semitic stereotypes of the food hoarder (Daniel 1997: 253). Davis 2000: 132–35. More anti-regime solidarity existed among the urban populace. Many believed that profits were enormous, pursued to the detriment of the war effort. Rationing was introduced but was perceived as unfair when distribution systems broke down and black markets flourished (Feldman 1966: 63–64, 157, 469–70, 480–81). As war bit hard into living standards, some starved while others consumed conspicuously. The experience brought the living standards of urban workers and the lower middle classes closer together. Davis (2000: Chapter 3) reports much middle-class sympathy for the protests of poor women. Smith (2007) sees a growing nationalist vernacular: a populism emerging in opposition to the Wilhelmine regime, led by the middle class but then uniting Germans across class lines and shattering the status- and class-ridden world of the monarchy. This movement achieved its greatest successes with the establishment of the dictatorship of Hindenburg and Ludendorff in late 1916, which made the Kaiser irrelevant. Smith sees the revolution of November 1918 not as a disruption caused by a suddenly lost war, but as a sudden intensification of this rising nationalist vernacular, once again an effect of war. To contain dissent, all combatants lodged greater coercive powers with employers, backed by ministries and military authorities suppressing dissent. Emergency measures restricted health and safety codes, especially for women and adolescents. Labor market and trade union freedoms were mostly suspended. In response, strike rates began to rise in the combatant countries during the last two years of war, though they were not rising as fast as in neutral countries like Norway, Sweden, and Spain. Though deprivation and post-war turbulence were linked, the timing of disturbances was weakly related to cost-of-living movements, and the revolutionary core proved to be relatively well-off industries such as metalworking (Cronin 1983: 30; Feldman 1972; Meder 1974: 38–39). But co-opted leftist party and union leaders could no longer lead dissent. Some concessions were made to them to help bolster their authority over the workers, but class dissent had been subdued and, in response was slowly finding new shop-floor organization. Employers felt pressures to consolidate the metalworking and ammunition industries, with labor shortages and a desperate need for production. In Britain, when Lloyd George tried to remedy labor shortages by bringing in unskilled laborers into skilled jobs, he commented ruefully that the actual arrangements for the introduction of dilated labor had to be made separately in each workshop, by agreement with the skilled workers there. French unions were weaker and they were excluded from government/employer negotiations until late in the war. Skilled men back from military service remained under military discipline and their employer could send them to the front for misbehavior. That was also true in Russia. French conditions then improved as the socialist armaments minister Albert Thomas made collective bargaining compulsory and introduced minimum wages (Becker 1985: Chapter 17; Bourd 2005: 52; Feldman 1966: 116–37, 373–85, 418–20; Gallie 1983: 252–34;
World War II

The war was fought on a global scale, with military conflicts taking place in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The Axis powers included Germany, Italy, and Japan, while the Allies were made up of the United States, the United Kingdom, China, the Soviet Union, and France, among others.

The war was characterized by significant advancements in military technology, such as the development of the atomic bomb. The war ended with the defeat of the Axis powers, leading to the formation of the United Nations.

The war exacted a heavy toll in terms of human lives and resources. It is estimated that the total number of casualties exceeded 50 million, with millions more affected by displacement and economic disruption.

The aftermath of the war saw the formation of new states, the rise of the United States as a superpower, and the beginning of the Cold War. It also led to significant changes in global politics and economics.
The biggest stumbling block to an alliance was ideological anti-communism. Political leaders in Britain and France did not want the Red Army to move westward. That could foment class revolution, they believed. A minority led by Churchill swallowed its ideological distaste on realist geopolitical grounds. It had long been British policy to support a balance of power in continental Europe. When Napoleon had managed to dominate most of Europe, Britain had allied with Russia in order to attack him from both sides. Again in World War I Britain had allied with Russia and France against Germany. Exactly the same logic was charged for in World War II. Yet Chamberlain and Daladier and their foreign ministers did not accept it and they clung to power until after war was declared (du Réau 1993; Inluy 2003: 34). After the fall of the Popular Front in April 1938, the rightist French government needed the votes of fascist-leaning deputies. By now most of the Left in both countries favored war, but because of anti-fascism, not nationalism.

Chamberlain still had a parliamentary majority and much popular support. Britain and France were not betrayed by a handful of appeasers, for public opinion did not want war and the parliament reflected that. This was not like World War I when elites alone had decided whether it would be war or peace. That was true in the dictatorships, but not in Britain or France, or in the United States where democracy also favored peace (though Roosevelt had almost zero influence on European developments). By the time of Munich, some change had occurred. An opinion poll showed British opinion to be fairly evenly divided over whether to aid the Czechs. But when Chamberlain returned from Munich waving his infamous bit of paper, declaring peace in our time, there was a surge of relief and he was greeted as a hero, the man who had averted war. After Hitler took up the Munich agreement, Chamberlain's position was revealed to have been "logical ... incomprehensible, except in terms of ideologically motivated anti-communism, rooted in the fear that war might bring revolution" (Carly 1999: 181). Class ideology had triumphed over nationalism.

When the war came, Germany again had better, more lethal soldiers. A German infantryman consistently inflicted about 50 percent higher casualties than did either his Britislic or his American counterpart. Was this due to greater nationalist commitment? As in the first war the Germans had a more mission-oriented command system giving more autonomy in combat to officers and NCOs so that they could move more flexibly and rapidly than their opponents. They also remainedlogically leaner and more fighting-focused, with a higher proportion of combat troops over support and service troops (Dupuy 1977: 234-5; van Creveld 1982). Under fascism, German armies had also become more classless than most armies (yet perhaps not more than the US Army). Higher class or education did not get you promoted, authority and courage did. At a time of lagging militarism elsewhere, German young men had been under military discipline in the 1930s, both in the Hitler Youth and the paramilitary National Labor Service. Millions had been enrolled as volunteers in collective mobilizations, the Volksgemeinschaft (national community) in practice (Fritzsche 2008: 51). The Wehrmacht had then added a more rigorous and harsher operational training than that practiced in any other army, and a harsher punishment system for officers. The combination, as Fritz (1995) notes, generated a collective elan, a sense of superiority won through greater commitment and sacrifice, and a sense of a Gemeinschaft (front community), which was the cutting edge of the Volksgemeinschaft. The soldiers were disproportionately members of the Nazi Party and their diaries and letters home idealized Hitler, remaining loyal to him to the end. Even after they were experiencing defeat and the Americans were experiencing victory, the American desertion rate remained several times higher than the German rate (van Creveld 1982: 116). The German soldiers' morale did reveal a higher national commitment, but of a novel, fascist kind. Indeed, soldiers' diaries and letters echoed Hitler's own boast about the seizure of Crete: the German soldier can do anything. So it is difficult here to separate out nationalist-rooted high morale from superiority in military organization, but both were present, reinforcing each other. For Japan also it is difficult to separate out the main causes of the Japanese soldier's resilience: a nationalist culture emphasizing hierarchy and community, the growing militarization of the Japanese state through the 1930s, and the "Imperial Way" strategy adopted by the High Command, emphasizing solid, spiritual mobilization, which could supposedly overcome the enemy's numerical and technological superiority. Japanese forces also perpetrated terrible atrocities, especially in China, as they had not in their war with Russia in 1905. In the meantime Japanese militarism had taken command of the state, and the disciplinary codes of the army had gotten much tougher. But the war also had a "nationalizing" effect on the population of China. Defined by Japanese soldiers as Chinese and racially inferior, and subjected to terrible atrocities, many now realized for the first time that they were indeed "Chinese"—again, nationalism was more of an effect than a cause of war.

France crumbled quickly, largely as a consequence of Germany's better military organization and tactics. But thereafter this was compounded by a highly divided nation, most of whose leaders preferred to make a deal with Hitler and get a half-fascist puppet state to continue the resistance. But Britain as an island nation could fight on. It also had
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sacrificed almost nothing for which they might need rewarding. The
troops obviously did sacrifice and they got their own welfare state after-
wards in the GI Bill of Rights. There is no doubting the capacity of mass
mobilization war to mobilize nationalism, but only German and Japanese
nationalism in their Nazi and militarist clothing had caused the greatest
war ever.

The US and Britain are not generally credited with wartime atrocities.
Yet devastating aerial bombing culminating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki
(though the fire-bombing of Tokyo and Dresden casued more casualties)
was inflicted at a distance, causing more civilian than military deaths. As
with naval blockades in World War I, lethality came from improved
technology more than from greater ferocity of intent, though revenge
for earlier German bombings was an important motive for the British
perpetrators, while racism directed against the Japanese was important
among the Americans. But militaries have always used the highest level
of technology available to them. The blame for these Anglo-American
mass killings does not lie primarily with nationalism.

Conclusion

I have given a skeptical account of the commonly assumed relationship
between nationalism and war. I found no overall correlation between the
incidence of war and of nationalism in the modern period. I attribute
the increased lethality of twentieth-century wars to technology rather
than nationalism. I found that amid the causes of World War I, nationalism
figured only in minor ways. The reverse causation looked much larger.
The war was (almost) a total war, mobilizing whole populations, and this
increased nationalism during the war. Among the troops, however,
this was subordinated to compliance with officers and comrades, which
was traditional in well-trained armies, while nationalism never eliminated
class or racial divisions. These exploded in the combustible great powers
and in their colonies as the war ended.

World War II differed, since it was caused principally by the extreme
nationalism of the two main aggressor regimes, in Germany and Japan.
However, theirs was a distinct variety of nationalism, infected with
fascism and extreme militarism. Among their opponents, class-based
anti-communism had overcome national solidarity in the run-up to
war, making resistance to Hitler initially more difficult. Class ideologies
helped bring France to defeat, while systematic class compromise
allowed Britain to resist. The US and the USSR also showed great
reluctance to go to war. When attacked, they also responded with more
bellicose nationalism.
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