

World War Two Never Ended

World War Two never ended. [It sounds like the plot of a dystopian science fiction novel, right?](#) Either the bad guys won, or the good guys didn't win, and either way, history as we know it isn't right. You can hear the Hollywood producer saying "great premise, kid, get a star to sign on and we'll run it on Netflix for a couple seasons, see if it sticks." Or some kind of click-magnet bait-and-switch b.s., like "well, technically Germany only signed a ceasefire..."

This essay is about an astonishing thing that I discovered while traveling in Eastern Europe, where much of the worst killing took place during the World War Two. What I discovered was this: for some people—mostly in Ukraine—WWII is still going on. It never ended.

This first occurred to me as a possibility while [traveling with NATO forces in Poland for Foreign Policy](#). There was an intense moment when the Poles observed German armored vehicles, tanks, and bridging assets crossing the Vistula River. A shadow crossed the faces of Polish Generals and civilians, I saw it happen: it started off as shock, then anger, then, over time, a kind of understanding. The Germans were back, yes, but as partners and allies. In other words—until that intellectual confrontation with the German military in their present-time, World War Two had not ended for the Poles.

About a month later, while interviewing a couple from Luhansk Oblast, the Ukrainian couple mentioned their 91-year-old grandmother. The elderly woman, a supporter of Ukraine,

continued living Luhansk after the separatists took over because (like many from her generation in Ukraine's east) she was simply too frail and poor to pick up and move. Fuzzy on the math, I asked them what she'd seen in her lifetime. Their answer? Holodomor, the Nazi Occupation, the Holocaust, the undeclared war with Poland, the Soviet recapture and plunder of Ukraine, the destruction of Ukraine's anti-Soviet rebellion by 1954. This was the first thirty years of one human's life.

Later, conducting analysis on the heavily industrialized east of Ukraine, along the contact line (where millions are at risk of shelling or attacks), I saw many elderly civilians confined to their homes, I became curious. How many people would have known about World War Two from their childhood? I used 1934 as a starting point, because (excluding Holodomor) WWII began for Ukraine in 1941, and I can remember being 7-8 years old pretty clearly. Being 10-15 is even clearer in my mind's eye. Well, according to numbers from 2014, there should be between 900,000 and 1.2 million Ukrainian citizens alive today who (judging from the things my grandfathers remembered after they slipped into senility) remember WWII. All of them understand that their country is at war. Tens of thousands of them live in the area directly threatened by hostilities.

Memory is a powerful tool. What, whether, and how a thing is remembered determines a lot about whether it stays active in the present. A woman broke my heart in college, and it took me years to get over it. That event was my present. People suffering from PTSD relive the trauma of the stressful event over and over—without medication, often, for the rest of their lives. Which explains why people who are traumatized are at greater risk for alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide.

So we have a population that grew up suffering under Stalin, the actual (not metaphorical) Hitler, and then Stalin again, which is currently being re-traumatized by Putin's Russia. This brings us to the reason that World War Two never stopped.

World War Two never stopped because it was a war fought over whether repressive anti-enlightenment totalitarianism would rule Europe and the world, or whether humanism and western values (even those espoused haphazardly as in republican oligarchies like the United States) would hold sway. And while we have said that we won WWII and the Nazis lost, or that the Soviet Union won WWII and the Nazis lost, the truth is, the intellectual and ideological conflict at the heart of WWII never disappeared. On the one hand, it didn't disappear because the Soviet Union was basically a more enthusiastic and popular if less well organized version of Nazi Germany (especially after 1945, when ethno-linguistic nationalism drove Russian ethnic cleansing)—and the USSR lasted well into the 20th century. So all the places that we neglected to liberate from the Soviet Union were basically places where WWII didn't have a chance to end, at least until the USSR's collapse. Because of active wars today, to some of those places (like Ukraine), we might as well have never fought WWII in the first place.

After all, even though we've moved on and successfully contained our understanding of World War Two

The Old Woman of World War Two – still traumatized after all these years

to [kitsch movies](#) or good-timey-grandpa [television series](#), there are people in every country who still aver that nationalism and race are ethically valid (even *necessary*) ways

of organizing people, that constant war against cultural nor national enemies should inspire praise or enthusiasm rather than anger or condemnation. These people exist in America, and in Russia, in Ukraine, Poland, and Germany. In Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, and Pakistan, and China and India. In Japan, of all places (proving that even nuclear weapons are not as powerful as human endurance).

We tell ourselves that World War Two ended because we have bad ways of understanding conflict—we speak in legal terms. A declaration of war means that the budget is spent certain ways, and that other types of medals become permissible for killing human beings. War is a state of being, where one lives in more or less constant anxiety that one's life will be taken, or that one will be hurt so badly that one will wish for death. War is rape, and murder, and looting, and lies—war is everything that's horrible about humans, brought out from the darkness and celebrated. War is also a legal state of relations between nation-states that become committed to each other's destruction—between ideas, and ideology.

But World War Two didn't end. Not in victory for us, nor in defeat for the Nazis, who somehow spread their way of thinking into other countries around the world, their vile attitudes toward religious and ethnic minorities, their appalling lack of humanity and contempt for post-enlightenment human rights. WWII did not end in victory for the Soviet Union, either, because the Soviet Union ended up incorporating the most meaningful platforms of Nazi Germany (ethnic nationalism based around Russia, rather than Germany, and victimizing minorities like Jewish people). For the UK's part, it lost its empire trying to stand for the things that might prove that it really had won WWII, or at least been on the winning side. Emancipating its former colonies was a decent gesture, but

ultimately irrelevant, as Brexit has demonstrated—eighty years after the conclusion of WWII, it's likely that today's England would have allied with Hitler's Germany, or at least managed to stay neutral. From an economic, ideological, and geopolitical position, the only country to come out conspicuously ahead after WWII was the United States of America.

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World War Two lives on in the memories of those who survived the Holocaust, in places like the USA, France, Russia, and Israel. It continues in the daily shelling endured by eighty-five-year-old women who live too close to the artificial border of the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and who are still drawing water from the wells of their grandparents. The ideas that compelled Europe to tear itself to shreds twice in three decades are still alive and well. The job begun of clearing darkness from Europe, the night of pre-enlightenment thinking, has yet to be completed.