

Portents for a future world war



PANDEMIC PERUSING

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Gerhard L. Weinberger's monumental history of World War II had been sitting unread on my bookshelf for the past five years. Thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, the heavy-weight volume served to occupy several solitary days at home. In *A World at Arms* Mr Weinberger has produced a magisterial survey of the 1939-45 war, focusing on its global dimensions and inter-connections, analysing the impact

of new weaponry and war strategies and pondering over both the genius and the foibles of the main *dramatis personae*. This new edition being reviewed has incorporated significant newly available records and archival material. Some long-held narratives about the war have been revised and one gets a more rounded, less Anglo-Saxon oriented account of how events unfolded.

Mr Weinberger points to a unique feature of the world war which has been his chief preoccupation in the book, "It is the special and peculiar characteristic of the upheaval which shook the world between 1939 and 1945 that dramatic events were taking place *simultaneously* in different portions of the globe; decision makers faced enormous varieties of decisions at one and the same time, and repercussions in areas far distant from those of any specific crisis or issues before them had constantly to be kept in mind."

The author painstakingly links events taking place in one theatre with those unfolding in another and how their

mutual dynamics affected outcomes in each. In looking at geopolitics in our far more globalised world today, the complexity confronting decision makers is infinitely more perplexing and often prone to misjudgement.

Mr Weinberger also reveals how much the leaders embroiled in the war were greatly influenced by the experience of World War I of 1914-18. Their decisions were coloured by the memories of that traumatic breakdown of a nearly a century of peace and progress. Major countries of Europe were held guilty of "sleepwalking" into that war. There was a strong inhibition against being trapped in a similar dynamic despite it being clear that Germany under Hitler was bent on waging war. The US entered the war only after it was attacked by Japan in 1942. The Soviet Union under Stalin became allied to Germany in 1939 and joined the war against it when Germany unexpectedly invaded it in 1941. The situation was similar in respect of Japan, which had already shown its true colours in its

extraordinarily brutal aggression against China in the 1930s. The lesson from this history is clear: The nature of political dispensations matter. The ideological temperament and idiosyncrasies of individual leaders matter. Looking at states as impersonal entities that interact with each other in accordance with tenets of international relations theory misses these other drivers.

A World at Arms is an unsparing account of the role played by several countries who later emerged as paragons of the liberal order. Sweden's complicity with the Nazi regime throughout the war, the profitable business its corporate entities did with Germany, supplying vast supplies of iron ore for its war effort is well documented. Vichy France which collaborated, sometimes quite enthusiastically, with its German conquerors is another ugly chapter. For Britain under Churchill, the empire was not negotiable and at the end of the war, the European powers rushed to reclaim their colonial possessions. The US under Roosevelt did try to nudge Britain towards granting independence to its colonies, in particular India. But it was a change of government in London that

paved the way for Indian independence. India provided both treasure and soldiers to help the allies win the war but this receives scant mention in the book. Subhas Chandra Bose appears as a marginal even tragic figure, taken seriously neither by the Germans nor the Japanese. US insistence that China under Chiang Kai Shek, the leader of Kuomintang (KMT) fighting the Japanese and the Communist forces, be given the status of a major power is intriguing. This was endorsed neither by the Soviets nor by the British, and Chiang hardly contributed to the victory over Japan in the Pacific War. When the war came to an end, the KMT was losing the civil war against Mao's Communist forces. But on US insistence China was acknowledged as one of the five major victorious allies entitled to be permanent members of the Security Council of the newly established United Nations.

What emerges from the book is how little change new technology made to the war effort. The weapons with which World War I were fought — that is tanks, artillery, aircraft carriers and submarines and fighters and bombers — remained the mainstay even though there were

incremental improvements. It is only towards the end of the war that we see more advanced weapons making their appearance including long range bombers, missiles and finally the terrifying nuclear weapons that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki setting a new standard in mass slaughter.

One fascinating area is the advance in cryptography, including British success in breaking German and Japanese wartime codes. This marked the early development of computers which have now become so ubiquitous. But contemporary war will be fought at a very different level of technological sophistication with outcomes far more devastating than may ever be imagined. Mr Weinberger draws our attention to the extraordinary and unprecedented level of cruelty and human suffering witnessed during the war. That appears pedestrian in comparison to what might await us if another major war breaks out in future. *A World at Arms* is a compelling warning why this must never happen.

The writer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow, CPR. Pandemic Perusing is an occasional column on reading and books