

Nuclear Weapons and the Second World War

Since the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons have captured the attention of social scientists and the public alike. Some argue that the world benefits from nuclear weapons, claiming that they prevent war. Skeptics do not share this view and worry that nuclear weapons will only intensify conflict. Unfortunately, most theories about the benefits of nuclear weapons await judgement, because history has yet to present enough hard evidence towards their confirmation or rejection. In the absence of concrete proof, thought experiments can be a useful tool to flesh out theories. By considering the hypothetical case in which nuclear weapons were present prior to the Second World War, this paper draws conclusions about the effect of nuclear weapons on the causes of war. First, analysis shows that nuclear weapons provide mutually assured destruction, balance militaries, facilitate cautious decisions and negotiations, and de-glorify militaristic perceptions of war, all of which may prevent war. Next, Hitler's role in starting WWII is examined by looking at his control over Germany, reluctance to negotiate, skewed ideology, and non-deterrable nature. Finally, it is argued that nuclear weapons could not have prevented conflict and instead may have intensified the Second World War.

Section 1 – Nuclear Weapons and the Prevention of War

First, it is important to explore how nuclear weapons prevent war. This section develops four theories about nuclear weapons and the prevention of war.

Nuclear weapons prevent war by offering a means of mutually assured destruction. Mutually assured destruction, or MAD, is the concept that says that should a war occur, both sides would have the capability to inflict an unacceptable level of damage to the other. Two properties unique to nuclear

weapons make MAD possible. First, the likelihood that one country could seize all of another country's nuclear weapons prior to retaliation is low. This arises because most countries store “defensive” nukes offshore in submarines, which are hard to locate and seize. Secondly, it only takes a few nuclear weapons to inflict an unacceptable amount of harm to another country. Take, for example, today's fusion bombs, which contain the equivalent of 1 megaton of dynamite. These weapons obliterate all infrastructure within a three and a half mile radius and cause second degree burns out to eleven miles¹. Prior to the production of nuclear weapons, war could be waged with an acceptable cost to the victor, since much of the war could be fought and won on enemy soil. However, with the advent of nuclear weapons and the fear of mutually assured destruction, wars are less likely to occur because a nuclear war would cause insurmountable damage to both the victor and the loser. In short, any conceived benefits of war are outweighed by the possibility of enormous costs.

In addition, Nuclear weapons largely balance the strength of two countries, which can prevent war. For most of history, wars were decided by a superior military force. The side with the most soldiers, or best technology, or largest industrial production would almost certainly be victorious. A victory through military superiority made it possible for a more powerful nation to exert its will on a weaker nation. Recently, nuclear weapons have balanced the playing field between countries with strong and weak militaries. The fact is that no amount of tanks, planes, or ships can protect a nation against a well-hidden stock of defensive nuclear weapons. A weaker nation merely needs to acquire a few nuclear weapons, after which the amount of damage either state can inflict on the other will be roughly even. In this way, nuclear weapons balance military inequities, and prevent stronger nations from starting wars against weaker nations.

The sheer power of nuclear weapons facilitates cautious decisions and negotiations, which in turn prevents war. Nuclear weapons are frightening. To many, their power to destroy is incomprehensible. This fear is amplified by the fact that we have not witnessed a nuclear war: the

¹ David Ziegler, *War, Peace, and International Politics 2nd ed.* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), 223.

terrors that accompany a war with nuclear weapons are unknown. However, it could be argued that this fear is beneficial. As Ziegler suggests, “when both sides possess enormous means of destruction, the traditional fear of losing war is joined by a second fear, that of ever getting into a war in the first place”². Thus, the sheer power of nuclear weapons forces leaders to think long and hard about entering a war. Furthermore, communication between nation states increases because both sides have much to lose. Communication, in turn, helps clear misperceptions about a rival state's intentions. Understanding rival intentions helps, nations avoid crises; and leads both nations towards a common middle ground. Thus, the fear that accompanies nuclear weapons helps prevent war.

Fourth and finally, Nuclear weapons prevent conflict by debunking militaristic glorifications of war. When a country overvalues military virtues, people forget the undeniable atrocities that accompany war and instead see it as beneficial to the nation and the individual. Proponents of militarism romanticize war to raise popular support for war. Militarism suggests that war helps shape an individual's virtues, such as loyalty, bravery, discipline, and strength. In this mindset, war is seen as a rite of passage to manhood. Nuclear weapons dissolve these militaristic illusions. They expose the realities of war; instead of men toughing it out on the battlefield, cities are obliterated with the single press of a button. Faced with nuclear weapons, no amount of loyalty, bravery, or strength will protect the soldier. Rather than the glorious rite of passage to manhood, nuclear war becomes the cold slaughter of soldiers and civilians alike. In this way, nuclear weapons reduce militarism, thereby preventing war.

These four theories on nuclear weapons suggest that nuclear weapons promote peace. Their sheer power de-glorifies militaristic perceptions of war, leads to cautious decisions and negotiations, equalizes militaries, and ensures MAD. However, not all of the necessary conditions that validate these theories existed in the years leading up to the Second World War.

² Ziegler, *War, Peace, and International Politics 2nd ed.*, 227.

Section 2 – Assumptions

Before examining the causes of WWII, it is important to present certain assumptions behind the thought experiment. First, this exercise assumes that nuclear weapons had been introduced in 1920 and by 1933, Germany, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States all had large second-strike counter-value capabilities. Second, it assumes that the leaders of nations have sufficiently tested nuclear weapons to know of their destructive capabilities. Most importantly, the thought experiment assumes that the introduction of nuclear weapons would have had no significant effect on key historical events or the timeline leading up to the Second World War. In particular, it is assumed that in the counterfactual world with nuclear weapons, Hitler still manages to rise to power in Germany.

Section 3 – The Culprit: Hitler

Although the claim that one man alone caused WWII is a gross oversimplification, Hitler undeniable played a major role in starting the war. From the outset, Hitler practiced a skewed ideology, which led him to seek war. He had a firm grip on the German population, lending him the ability to lead his nation into war. Furthermore, Hitler disregarded negotiations, which made the attempts of other countries to avoid war fruitless. Most importantly, Hitler could not be deterred because he did not value the German people – he cared only for the advancements of his warlike goals.

Hitler had a skewed set of ideologies that fueled his war-prone agenda. As Haffner writes, “he based his political strategy very definitely upon firm and indeed rigid basic ideas which, moreover, he had so arranged for himself that they produced a reasonably logical system”³. In Hitler's mind, the only actors in the world scene were nations or races. He believed that nations must engage in war to expand their living space and to promote self-preservation. Moreover, he thought that war was essential to the evolution of humans; stronger nations dominate and spread by winning wars, while weaker nations fall and are annihilated. Hitler also believed in the necessity of world domination. This final belief is

3 Sebastian Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), 76-77.

revealed in one of Hitler's speeches, "man will find himself confronted by problems which only a supreme race, as a master nation based upon the resources and facilities of an entire globe, can be called upon to solve"⁴. Therefore, Hitler genuinely thought that the world was in need of a supreme race for humanity to survive. In this way, Hitler justified and sought out war.

Hitler's control over the German population gave him ultimate power to arbitrate decisions on a national level. He enlisted his private group of thugs, the SA, to eliminate party opposition and civil disobedience through fear and violence. Once in control, Hitler influenced public opinion. At his command, Germany's public relations campaign spread Nazi propaganda using quasi-scholarship, control over the press, and German youth programs⁵. Hitler's mesmerizing oration amplified this effect, allowing him to personally sway public opinion. Moreover, people witnessed and lauded Hitler's seemingly miraculous achievements. The populace saw Hitler carry Germany out of the Great Depression, eliminate unemployment⁶, and return Germany to its former military strength⁷. These changes earned him respect. Thus, whether through fear, brainwashing, or respect, Hitler won over the German population, giving him the reins with which to start a war.

On a national level, Hitler could not be negotiated with, which made peace-keeping efforts impossible. Hitler did not respect any of Germany's promises to other countries. For example, he violated the Treaty of Versailles, withdrew Germany from the League of Nations, and broke promises in the Rhineland, Austria, and the Czech⁸. Hitler's own words reaffirm how little negotiations mattered to him: reflecting on WWII to Bormann in 1945, Hitler remarked, "we had an interest in starting it a year earlier . . . but I could not do anything since the British and French accepted all my demands at Munich"⁹. Clearly, Hitler wanted to start a war and saw negotiations as a barrier to this goal.

Furthermore, Hitler was not deterrable because he placed no value in the German people. To

4 Haffner, 79.

5 Van Evera, *Origins of the Second World War*, class notes, 1.

6 Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, 27.

7 Haffner, 29.

8 Van Evera, class notes, 4.

9 Haffner, *The Meaning of Hitler*, 41.

Hitler, war was all or nothing: a nation either won or it lost. If the nation won, it was because that nation's race was superior. If it lost, it was because the nation did not deserve to exist. To Hitler, a nation that could not achieve world domination was a nation unfit to live. For this reason, the value he placed on the German people was contingent on Germany winning wars. Hitler's actions near the end of WWII confirm this thought process. He sabotaged the German government by arresting 5,000 former elected officials, so that Germany would crumble in his wake¹⁰. Next, he pitted most of his forces against the Western powers the Ardennes offensive¹¹. Not only was this mission doomed to fail, but it left the East vulnerable to the approaching Russians. At the conclusion of the war, when it was clear that the allies had won, Hitler attempted to subject the German people to the mercy of the Russians rather than letting them surrender to the Western powers. In Germany, there was a widespread fear of being captured by Russia, and a desire to surrender to the Western powers. The Russians were seen as merciless, whereas Westerners were thought to be civilized. Thus, when Hitler ordered the evacuation of Western Germany into Eastern Germany, he deliberately tried to destroy the German people. Hitler's reasons for the evacuation are depicted in his remarks to Speer, the Minister of Armaments:

If the war is lost then the nation will be lost also. There is no need to show any consideration for the foundations which the German nation needs for its most primitive survival. On the contrary, it is better to destroy those things ourselves. Because this nation has shown itself the weaker, and the future belongs exclusively to the stronger nation from the East. In any event, what remains after this struggle are only the inferior, for the good have died in battle.¹²

This passage re-emphasizes Hitler's attitude towards war and the German people: he placed no value on the German population if Germany could not win the war. Hitler's disregard for the German people made him non-deterrable.

Hitler's skewed ideology gave him reason to seek war. His control of the German people gave him the means to wage war. His distaste for negotiation made peacekeeping efforts impossible.

10 Haffner, 152.

11 Haffner, 155.

12 Haffner, 160.

Finally, his lack of value for the German people rendered deterrence impossible. Therefore, Hitler was largely responsible for starting WWII.

Section 4 – Hitler: The Unbendable Force

As shown, nuclear weapons can prevent wars. Under the right circumstances, they de-glorify war, facilitate negotiations, balance military strength, and provide mutually assured destruction. In reality, given Hitler's skewed ideology, control over Germany, non-negotiable stance, and undeterrable nature, nuclear weapons would have done little to prevent WWII.

Hitler's absolute control over Germany meant that WWII would have occurred even without militarism. As previously mentioned, nuclear weapons can change the peoples opinion about war by de-glorifying militaristic values. However, changing the public discourse on war only prevents war if the public has the power to influence its leaders. Hitler's control over the population through force, propaganda, and respect gave him the power to start the war without public support. Skeptics to this claim need only look at the Holocaust. No sane person would say that the German people desired the mass extermination of a culture. In light of this, Hitler's ability to exterminate over five million Jews illustrates his power to manipulate Germany, even without popular support. Therefore, the theory that nuclear weapons prevent war by reducing militarism does not apply to the Second World War.

With the population under control, the only internal force that may have opposed a nuclear war was the military. Survival of an organization such as the military is contingent on avoiding unfavorable wars. For this reason, the German military may have resisted Hitler's belligerent goals. However, history shows that Hitler and his military rarely agreed throughout WWII. The Second World War exhibits instance after instance of Hitler recklessly defying his generals. For example, in 1941, Hitler ordered the execution of Operation Barbarossa, an invasion of the USSR. This decision was made contrary the military's advice to focus Germany's efforts on Great Britain. Then, in his invasion of Russia, just 20 miles from Moscow, Hitler turned his attention to capturing more Russian territory, even

though the German General Staff urged Hitler to lay siege to Russia's capital. Moreover, Hitler declared war against the United States in opposition to Germany's foreign minister and top-ranking officers¹³. It could be argued that if Hitler had listened to the military in any of these instances that Germany would have won the war. Therefore, his brash defiance of the military throughout WWII suggests that the Germany's military may not have been enough to dissuade Hitler from a nuclear war.

In addition, Hitler's non-negotiable stance would have annulled the ability of nuclear weapons to facilitate cautious decisions and negotiations. This is evident from the failure of British and French appeasement tactics. Not only did Hitler dishonor agreements, but he also saw diplomacy as a barrier to his ultimate goal: war. Thus, the theory that nuclear weapons prevent war by promoting negotiations fails under WWII conditions.

Furthermore, Hitler's misguided ideology would have stood in the way of the balancing power of nuclear weapons. As discussed, his opinion about nations and races competing for survival and world domination led him to believe that war was beneficial and even necessary. By declaring war on Britain, Russia, and the United States, Hitler demonstrated that he was not afraid to fight against the odds. To him, war was a necessity, regardless of relative strength. Thus, nuclear weapons as a balancer would not have dissuaded Hitler from fighting.

Most importantly, Hitler's disregard for the German people made him non-deterrable, which would have nullified the effects of MAD. By sabotaging the German government, ordering the Ardennes offensive, and evacuating Eastern Germany, Hitler showed that he did not care about his people. His feelings towards the German people are confirmed in his rhetoric. For example, Hitler remarked, "if one day the German nation is no longer sufficiently strong or sufficiently ready for sacrifice to stake its blood for its existence, then let it perish and be annihilated by some other stronger power ... I shall shed no tears for the German nation"¹⁴. What better way to achieve Hitler's goal than

13 Robert C. Daniels, "Military History Online." <<http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwii/articles/worstgeneral.aspx>> May 4, 2009.

14 Haffner, 160.

to enter a nuclear war in which the loser would undoubtedly be “annihilated?” For this reason, a second-strike counter-value capability would not have influenced Hitler, who placed no value on German lives.

Conclusion

While nuclear weapons can prevent war, they likely would not have stopped the Second World War. In fact, there is reason to believe that nuclear weapons would have intensified WWII. Britain and France would have been even more reluctant to enter a war with nuclear weapons than one without. As a result, they would have continued appeasement for longer. This would tip the balance in favor of the unappeasable Hitler, who would have pressed even harder to start a war. The disproportionate intensification of appeasement and aggression would have led to a more intense war, once war inevitably broke out. Finally, the side that began to lose its advantage would resort to nuclear weapons out of desperation. Then, the world, or what would be left of it, would know the true horrors of a global nuclear war.

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