

SIGNS OF LIFE AT THE U.N., BY MORTON KONDRACKE

AUGUST 13, 1990 • \$2.95

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

Josef Joffe: the 1914-1990 war • The Bush court • Michael Walzer: nationalism

This will be on the test.

## WHAT JUST HAPPENED: A LITE HISTORY

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH

Class, something really big happened last week. What was it?—"Madonna went to Europe."—Good, Europe is good, but that's not quite it. Something to do with Germany. And war.—"I know! The Germans won the soccer championship."—That was the week before, but you're getting closer. The Germans and the ... who? ... did what?—"The Who? They played with Pink Floyd in Berlin?"—No, no, no, no! OK, let me tell you ...

Last week, with a chummy declaration of Russian surrender, the cold war came to an end. There was no ticker-tape parade down Broadway, no dancing on the Champs-Élysées. Unlike 1918 and 1945, 1990 didn't play in Peoria. But that is no reason to ignore an epochal moment that future historians will bill right up there alongside 1815 (the end of the Napoleonic Wars), 1713 (the end of the War of the Spanish Succession), and 1648 (the end of the Thirty Years' War).

July 16, 1990, will get a boldface entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* ("Europe, history of") because it marks a similar watershed. On that day, Mikhail Gorbachev agreed with Helmut Kohl to let a reunited Germany stay in NATO and to remove his troops from East Germany—all 380,000 of them—within the next four

.....  
JOSEF JOFFE, foreign editor of the Munich *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, will be the Kenab Professor of National Security Affairs at Harvard University next fall. This is the introductory lecture to his course "European Security, 1871-1991."

years. This may not sound like much; the United States pulled half a million out of Vietnam in the early 1970s, and California is still there. But as far as Europe is concerned, the Soviet bow-out is History. It signifies nothing less than the end of a struggle over Europe that began in 1914, Russia's definitive retreat from that struggle, and hence the birth of a new European order.

The cold war, though it saw plenty of peripheral engagements in places like Korea (cf. "war in," "M\*A\*S\*H") and Cuba (cf. "missile crisis," "*Dr. Strangelove*"), was above all a contest over Europe and Germany. If you like your history really big, you might call the cold war "Part Three" in a Wagnerian cycle (hence the British refrain, "We'll hang our washing on the Siegfried Line") titled *The Century of Total War*, libretto by Raymond Aron. Part I took place between 1914 and 1918; Part II was World War II; Part III was the cold war, circa 1947 to 1990.

The main characters in Part I, a.k.a. the Great War, were Germany, Russia, Austria, France, and Britain—with the United States, in the ingenue role, making a late entrance in the last act. The war was triggered by a certain Mr. Gavrilo Princip when he murdered the Austrian crown prince in a place called Sarajevo. But that, class, was only the *immediate* cause. The *real* cause was a German grab for all-out hegemony.

Latecomers to the table of the great powers (cf. "Bismarck," "1871"), the Germans had learned fast, picking up where previous hegemonists had dropped out. Nobody liked Kaiser Bill and his spike-helmeted Prus-

sians, but Wilhelm II was acting out a well-thumbed European scenario—the “corrupt game of despots and princes,” which had sent the Americans’ straight-laced ancestors heading for Plymouth Rock. The contest had started with the birth of the European nation-state in the fifteenth century; the heavy action began in the seventeenth. The Thirty Years’ War of 1618 to 1648 (with at least sixty-five participants) was still a general tryout, like at the beginning of *A Chorus Line*. Then the kick line boiled down to pairs, and this—a series of “dominant conflicts”—is what European history has been all about until this very day.

**F**irst there were Louis XIV and Charles V. Although (or because) Charles was Louis’s grandson, the Sun King was riled that, in 1700, the fifth Charles inherited too many crowns from the second Charles. Worse, No. 2—with no kids of his own—wasn’t even No. 5’s real father. On the basis of a dubious will, Charles V now owned all of Spain, half of Italy, the Low Countries, and everything between Saxony and Serbia. Louis felt hemmed in by this; and as there was no probate court around, he started the War of the Spanish Succession. While he was at it, he figured: Why not be done with his balance-of-power jive and take all of Europe?

Except that the Duke of Marlborough, later to be honored with the name of a cigarette, wouldn’t let him. And so the war ended amid general exhaustion with the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which proclaimed a “just equilibrium of power.” But remember this, class: the hegemonist always rings twice. Though they had broken the Spanish-Austrian connection, the French could not forget Marlborough (they still smoke Gauloises). For the next century, they intermittently fought the Brits all over the world, which is why the Seven Years’ War in Europe had its trans-Atlantic counterpart, the French and Indian Wars.

But the French really got going for the second time after they had guillotined their king and invented democracy. You see, democracy turned out to be the greatest boon to warfare since the crossbow. It gave you an ideology that mobilized the millions (look up “*levée en masse*”). This meant cheap soldiers and unlimited goals that make short shrift of such kingly stuff as the balance of power. Revolutionary élan took the French the way to Moscow. But once again, the Brits struck, finishing Bonaparte off at Waterloo, which is why Wellington has a piece of beef named after him and Napoleon only a puff pastry.

At the Vienna Congress in 1815, French hegemonial ambitions were laid to rest amid much ballroom dancing. The powers were so exhausted afterward that they could not start a really big war until 1914, which points to the Vienna waltz as a greatly underestimated factor of peace. But there’s always some tough guy who doesn’t dance. This brings us back to the twentieth, the century of total war. The imperial Germans had everything required to go Louis and Napoleon one better: a sense of encirclement, paranoid nationalism, and a high-torque industrial machine. In the end they only

got as far as Versailles, because none of the other Europeans wanted to click heels or wear monocles.

Still, like Spain and France before it, Germany had to try one more time. While the French revolutionary armies at least had left behind the ideas of *liberté*, wholesome concepts that shape much of our existence today, the Nazis used quite another idea to propel them to the gates of Moscow. Hegemony was to belong to the *Herrenvolk*, the “master race,” and so World War II was truly total—unleashed not just against armies but against human beings as such. To give you a sense of the “century of total war,” World War II took the lives of 55 million.

**B**ut there was still Part III, the “cold war.” Now it was the turn of the Soviets. Maybe they too felt encircled, having crushed the Nazi beast only to find another, far more potent foe—the United States—on their doorstep. But they behaved more like encirclers than encircled. As Stalin put it: “This war [World War II] is not as in the past. Whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system . . . as far as his army can reach.” Which he did. Having liberated Eastern Europe, he enslaved it again. Having conquered half of Germany, he wanted to make sure that the rest would not be part of the West, figuring that without Germany, America’s containment policy would fall in tatters. His successors continued to dish out grief, threatening the French and the British with nuclear war at the time of Suez, unleashing the Berlin Crisis (1958-62), building up a huge war machine in Eastern Europe, and finally fielding one SS-20 missile per week to turn Western Europe into a nuclear hostage.

Let me digress for a moment. Before you were born, class, we had a debate in academia: Who started the cold war? Well, the “revisionists,” trying to lay the guilt on the United States, had it wrong. All FDR wanted was to go back to Hyde Park, and so, at Yalta, he had promised “Uncle Joe” that the United States would pull out of Europe by 1947. But then the Soviets began communizing Eastern Europe and getting their sticky fingers all over Germany and beyond, and the cold war started in earnest. Today, the cold war is over precisely because the Russians, handing in their CPSU cards, are pulling out and finally laying off Germany. Q.E.D. They tried to do what Charles, Louis, Napoleon, Wilhelm, and Adolf also tried to do—and they failed. This is why both Eisenhower and Bush have a jacket named after them.

Now, why did the cold war claim not a single life—if you ignore Korea, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and a few Russian interventions in Eastern Europe? Anyone? That’s right: nuclear weapons. You see, Louis didn’t have to worry about somebody breaking the mirrors at Versailles when he tussled with Charles; at worst, he’d lose a province there, a fortress there. Pins on a map. When the kaiser’s troops left Berlin Station in August ’14, they yelled, “We’ll be back for Christmas!” But with nukes having atomized their Tannenberg, today’s conquerors might return to a glowing

pile of rubble. Nor did the *Wehrmacht* boys foresee how unpleasant the war would become. Since the 1950s, however, everybody has known with horrifying precision exactly what nuclear weapons will do to them. (No, don't pop *Back to the Future III* into the VCR; get *On the Beach*.)

You see, though the United States and the USSR had assembled the largest peacetime armies the world has ever seen, none dared fire the first shot for fear of what the last one would bring. The strategy mavens call this "crisis stability." It's a paradox. Because nuclear weapons create absolute insecurity, they confer absolute security. You can always threaten the other guy with total extinction, and you don't have to call up your reserves or your allies. (Remember: It was the cumbersome mobilization machinery—who would be ready first?—that sucked everybody in the maws of World War I.) With nukes you can rely on yourself, and you can simultaneously deter any and all comers. That gives great powers a margin of security they never enjoyed before.

The Russians, apart from being flat broke, have finally understood what neo-isolationist strategists in the United States have proclaimed all along. In an age of nuclear missiles you don't need allies. For the Soviets, in fact, "allies" were a liability. They required costly armies to police, and beating them up gave the Soviets a bad press. So while Russians will debate "Who lost Germany?" for the next twenty years, they know in their hearts that it doesn't matter—at least not in terms of real national security. (For the same reason, nobody in America has ever suggested going *back* into Vietnam.)

Being broke made Soviet surrender advisable; nuclear weapons made it palatable; and the collapse of Lenin-

ist ideology made it inevitable. If the empire itself no longer believes in its *raison d'être*, why should the Communist creed radiate beyond the core? To be sure, power in Eastern Europe came out of the barrels of Soviet tanks. But the Soviets and their satraps thought that History was on their side, and that added conviction to the clout. Toss out the creed, and you toss in the towel. This is where the "century of total war," which we could glimpse dimly as early as 1793, has truly come to an end. What started with a classic hegemonic conflict in Part I and was driven to murderous "perfection" in Part II has finished with a semi-happy ending in the last scene of Part III—after forty-odd years of total struggle, though "cold" it luckily did remain.

Class, I've come to the end, too. For tomorrow's section meetings I want you to think about the following questions. Are we headed for a "century of total peace," as some of my colleagues, believing in the "end of history," have proclaimed? Can you think of other "integralist ideologies" that are not seriously dead? Please look up "Islam." Also, go back to the very first integralist ideology, namely nationalism, and apply it to contemporary events in Serbia, Lithuania, Kosovo, Azerbaijan, the West Bank, and the Ukraine. Think in general about the connection between collapsing empires and war. Finally, do try to think about the United States in Europe, which is now set to go home. How did the Great Protector pacify ancient conflicts in Western Europe, and who will play that role once America is gone? Also, Russia has had only one try—will it, too, go for a second? What about Germany, once more unified and No. 1 in Europe? How's that? Did I hear "three Reichs and you're out?" All right, that's it. Class dismissed. And brush up on your German. ●

---

The quietly great secretary general.