World War II, A War for Resources: Crash Course World History #220

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're gonna talk about World War II. But we're not gonna look at it as a battle between good and evil, but instead as a war for resources, particularly a war for food.

Past John: Wait, Mr. Green, Mr. Green! What about like Rosie the Riveter and Pearl Harbor and Nazis and Hitler?

Yeah, Me from the Past, I mean if the question is "Was Hitler evil?" then...yeah. But evil people generally can't, like, cause massive world wars on their own so instead of talking about uh you know, the personality-driven model of history, I wanna talk about resources, specifically my favorite resource: food.

(Intro)

So the story of World War II is commonly told as a narrative of good vs. evil, and it is, but we can also look at the Second World War through the lens of resource allocation, and I think if we do, it tells the story of both causes of the war and one of the ways that it impacted both soldiers and civilians.

The presence or absence of food affected everyone involved in World War II. In the most stark terms, the absence of food led to the deaths, directly or indirectly, of at least 20 million people during those years, as compared to 19.5 million military deaths.

Now of course both the Nazis and the Japanese were militaristic and expansionist in the 1930s, and they were both definitely motivated by nationalism, but they were also seeking something called autarchy.

You can remember this term by conjuring the feeling one gets near Thanksgiving: "Ahh, turkey." You can also remember it by thinking about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire: "Aw, Turkey."

Anyway, autarchy is a form of self-sufficiency in a world where increasingly people were reliant on world trade, and that made nations more and more dependent upon each other to meet basic needs.

Both Germany and Japan lacked the resources within their borders that they needed to build their growing industrial states, and the resource that concerned them most was food. And this is a big part of what motivated their imperialist expansionism, like Hitler talked all the time about expanding German territory to acquire Lebensraum, or "living space." But what this meant, of course, was agricultural land to feed Germans, that's what "living space" is really about on Earth. And most Germans at the time remembered the blockade during World War I, which had led to acute food shortages.

For the Nazis, to quote Collingham, "Lebensraum would make Germany truly self-sufficient and immune to blockade and this would eventually enable Germany to challenge British and American hegemony."

Meanwhile, in Japan, the need for food was also spurring imperial ambitions. If anything, Japan's limited space created a sense of crisis and made colonies seem necessary. Like Japanese colonies in Korea and Formosa, taken in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894 and 1895, provided 20 percent of the Japanese domestic rice crop by 1935. And then the Great Depression and Japan's growing population made the situation appear even worse and probably led to the decision to annex Manchuria after 1931.

So the Germans' plan was to open up Poland and eventually parts of Russia to German farmers. The Japanese plan was to resettle farmers in Manchuria to provide food for the homeland. So if the desire for more food was one of the initial causes of World War II, it also shaped the actual strategy of the war. This was especially true with one of the stupidest decisions of the war: Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union.

A German agronomist named Hans Backe put forth something called the Hunger Plan, and in doing so, convinced Hitler that in order to become self-sufficient, Germany had to invade the Soviet Union. And everyone knows that you cannot successfully invade Russia unless you are the Mongols!

Anyway, the plan was that Ukraine and western Russia would be transformed into a huge breadbasket that would feed both the German armies and German civilians. This was never fully implemented, because, y'know, the Nazis could never successfully nail down all of the territory, but Collingham argues that it was a primary motive for Hitler's disastrous invasion of the U.S.S.R.

And then on the western front, the so-called Battle of the Atlantic was largely about shipping arms, material, and food from the U.S. to Britain. This was incredibly important in the opening years of World War II, like Winston Churchill once said that "The Battle of the Atlantic was the dominating factor all through the war. Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea or in the air, depended ultimately on its outcome." In short, it was Britain's dependence on other parts of the world that ultimately made it stronger than Germany's attempts at self-sufficiency.

Starvation never became an issue for the Brits, but fear of running out of food, especially of running out of food for the troops, led to policies that made starvation a reality for many people in British colonies. In British Africa, for instance, colonial policy forcing production for the war instead of for domestic food consumption meant shortages that were only made worse by wartime inflation; crop failure in Rhodesia in 1942 meant widespread hunger and famine; and in an echo of what happened at the end of the 19th century, World War II and British colonial policies spelled disaster for India. Japan had seized Burma in early 1942, cutting off 15 percent of Bengal's rice supply, and when harvests failed later that year, hunger turned to famine. Now the British could have alleviated the suffering, but they were afraid to use supply ships that might be needed for the war effort to bring food to starving people in India. When you take into account hunger-associated diseases, between 1.5 and 3 million Indian civilians died, more than the total number of Indian combatants killed in World War I and World War II combined.

In the United States, meanwhile, there was no starvation, but there was some rationing. And this was especially relative to most recent American wars: some shared sacrifice Americans gave up coffee and chocolate so that the troops could be well-fed. So Americans and Britons hardly suffered from hunger, neither did the Germans, actually, where memories of World War I made feeding the civilian population a top priority. Of course, millions of civilians weren't being fed because they were being murdered or worked to death in concentration camps.

But in Britain, World War II might have actually improved people's diets. Now Britons largely despised the wholemeal national loaf of bread, but it was much more nutritious than white bread, and its flour took up less cargo space. It's amazing to think that British people would dislike good food when there's so much of it in their country. Stan, this is the part where in the comments all the British people say, "We are not a country! We're four separate countries!"

The Dig for Victory campaign encouraged ordinary people to plant gardens and so they ate more vegetables. Full employment and higher wages meant that working class people also had access to

more nutritious foods. Also, y'know, they had the benefit of Canada growing like a gajillion acres of wheat.

Although both the British and the Germans saw an overall reduction in caloric intake, it was nothing compared with what was happening in the U.S.S.R., Japan, and China. In Russia, daily caloric intake by the end of the war was half of what it had been in 1940. And I'll remind you that things were not great in 1940 in Russia, because Stalin. The daily caloric ration for Japanese women workers fell to 1476 calories, which was bad, but in China, where the corrupt Nationalist army was known to sell rice to the Japanese for profit, a famine in Guangdong claimed the lives of as many as 1.5 million peasants. And without doubt, much of the civilians suffering in the war was related to the massive amounts of food needed to keep soldiers fighting. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In World War II, the U.S. and Britain made a massive effort to make sure that their soldiers were well-fed, and for the most part it paid off, even though the food that they got was sometimes pretty gross. The British World War I diet of biscuits and bully beef eventually gave way to the appetizingly named "composite ration."

American soldiers may have complained a lot about their infamous "C and K" rations, but they were the best-fed soldiers in the world, receiving a whopping 4,758 calories per day, including meat at every meal, because you know, America.

As you can probably guess, Soviet soldiers did not fare so well, especially when the Germans invaded because it was their policy to live off the land, which meant scrounging as much food from the Russian countryside as they could. German troops weren't as well-fed as the Americans or Brits, but they still managed to scarf down a respectable 4,000 calories per day.

No combat soldiers were as consistently hungry, however, as the Japanese. Japanese soldiers were expected to feed themselves and were not provided with field kitchens. Often this meant that Japanese soldiers were fueled by little more than rice. And as the war turned against them, it became more and more difficult for Japanese troops to feed themselves. On Guadalcanal, the Japanese attempted to resupply their troops with floating barrels dropped from passing ships, but by December 1942, between 120 and 130 soldiers were dying of starvation every day. The Japanese commander there estimated that while 5,000 of his soldiers died in combat, 15,000 starved to death. Overall, it's estimated that more than 1 million of the 1.74 million Japanese military deaths were caused by starvation or malnutrition.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So a quick look at the history section in your local bookstore or an IMDb search will tell you that there are hundreds if not thousands of ways to tell the story of World War II. And this is just one history of the war, certainly not a definitive one. But examining the role of resources, especially food in the Second World War, tells a story that has at least one advantage over the narrative of the triumph of Allied good over Axis evil, because it helps us to see that the war was not only about the soldiers fighting it. It gives us a window into the way the war affected everyone who lived at the time.

It also allows us to see World War II from a global perspective in a way that focusing on strategy or tactics or pivotal battles doesn't. Like, very little fighting went on in sub-Saharan Africa or most of India, but these places were deeply affected by the war in ways that don't often make it into history books.

Also, we live today in a thoroughly globalized world, but so did the people of the 1930s, and it's very interesting to see some of their responses to it. That hyper-nationalist idea that we can take care of ourselves and don't need help from outside (as long as we annex a lot of territory that's currently outside of us)--that idea, it is a response to globalization. But I think history shows us that it's a horrible response. It's a dangerous business when humans imagine others as less when they think that their land needs to become our land so that we can feed our people, and in that sense, at least, you can't separate ideology from resource allocation, and as long as we live in a world of finite resources, the potential for conflict will always be there. Knowing that hopefully will help us to avoid it. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

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