WHY DID THE AXIS LOSE THE SECOND WORLD WAR?
A POLITICO-MILITARY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Considering the magnitude of forces involved, the expenditures involved and the human and material losses produced, the Second World War has been the largest and most deadly uninterrupted conflagration of human history so far. It was the very first time when a considerable number of new technical breakthroughs including the atomic bomb were widely used against militaries and civilians alike, directly or indirectly, causing the death of over 50 million people, about 3% of the world population of that time¹. War began on 1 September 1939, with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, and ended six years later with the complete defeat of the Axis Powers – Germany, Japan and Italy – by the Allied Forces – United States, Great Britain and Soviet Union. ‘Rivers’ of ink have flowed on this subject; a large bibliography has analysed causes and factors that allowed Allies to be victorious in the Second World War but we cannot say the same about the causes that led to the defeat of the Axis powers. ‘Vae Victis’, as Romans would say, meaning ‘Woe to the vanquished ones’.

Keywords: Second World War, Axis Powers, Allied Forces, politico-military perspective, socio-economic perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to answer why the Axis lost the second world conflagration, this paper aims to identify some of the possible causes that led to the defeat of Germany, Japan, Italy and their allies. The focus will be on Germany without limiting the research to this country alone. On a summary examination, it appears that Axis powers lost the Second World War due to their politico-military and socio-economic mistakes; unpardonable strategic errors generated mostly by the arrogance and stubbornness of Axis leaders, poor coordination of military efforts, the effects of the extreme antisocial measures adopted, and lack of proper economic support to war machine led to the defeat of Axis powers. However, these aspects must be thoroughly analysed in conjunction with concepts, theories and analytical tools provided by old and modern scholars, which investigated the “domain” of war.

However, before embarking upon an analysis to identify the reasons that caused the Axis powers to lose the war, it is absolutely necessary to look for the causes that led to the outbreak of the Second World War. At the end of the First World War, no one believed that such a devastating conflict would ever break out again. A very pacifist wind, fuelled by the Wilsonian principles, was blowing in the diplomatic world: it was believed that a worldwide organisation such as the League of Nations was enough to impose a well-defined set of international norms meant to preserve peace, and any irrational and aggressive action would of a state would thus be stopped. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Hans J. Morgenthau, when he set out the first principle...
of political realism, in his famous work “Politics among nations” (1948), namely that “politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature”, of course he took into account the conflicting side of the human individual, the permanent inner struggle between his moral impulses and their urge to master, to conquer, and considered that any attempt to impose the rules of inner morality of the individual as international norms was illusory. An advocate for Realpolitik, Morgenthau showed us that war must be read in this key of being aware that there is a permanent struggle between power and peace, and those who do not understand it risk repeating the tragic mistakes of history. Animus dominandi, the desire to dominate, dictates the flow of things in human society, according to Morgenthau, and therefore governs international relations, an inherent part of an imperfect world. And considering that the solutions proposed by internationalist liberals, by certain Wilsonian origin – collective security, enforcement of international law –, are seen as utopian, the realists propose the theory of the balance of power as the only successful response to the attempt to preserve peace. Its essence is very simple: when the power of an actor on the international stage increases inadmissibly much, thus threatening the integrity of the other participants of the same “calibre” in the world game, an automatic adjustment system, embodied by alliances, coalitions or any other type of association with the purpose of limiting the aggressor’s influence is set in motion to remove any possibility of global hegemony. Considering that the events of the Second World War unfolded in this exact way, Morgenthau’s territory seems to be confirmed.

Another great international relations theorist, Kenneth Waltz, the father of neo-realism and believer in the theory that the pressure exerted by the structures belonging to the system is what causes chaos and violence, also embraces the theory of the balance of power. “As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors

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6 Realpolitik, political trend according to which it is not morals, ethics and other ideological reasons that govern international politics and diplomacy but given facts and circumstances, as well as pragmatic factors. Key representatives: Carl von Clausewitz, Otto von Bismark, Henry Kissinger.
unbalanced power,” Waltz said. Nothing can be truer. There are countless examples in history when, in the face of an imminent threat, nations that apparently had only conflicting interests agreed to oppose the common aggressor together. This was also the case with the extraordinary mobilisation of forces against Germany, and its allies. Through an extremely aggressive attitude, spread throughout the 12 years of existence of the Third Reich, it resulted in bringing together a coalition of opposing forces that would have been impossible to achieve otherwise. And the moment when Great Britain, the United States and the USSR decided to join forces meant the beginning of the end for the Axis powers.

THE POLITICO-MILITARY PERSPECTIVE

Following the Treaty of Versailles, which regulated the end of World War I, Germany lost a tenth of the population and 13% of the territory, the colonies were confiscated and redistributed by the newly established League of Nations, and the project of unification with Austria was banned. The period of chaos and extreme domestic violence that followed has left deep marks, and on this general background, dominated by a devastating economic crisis, fear, hatred and revenge spirit, it is no wonder that radical nationalism flourished rapidly. On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany and, in less than two months, he set up a ruthless dictatorship, imposing a law of empowerment on the Reichstag, by which he captured both the executive and the legislative powers, and the National Socialist Party became the sole leader of the Germany. Hitler’s rise to power resembles somehow to that of Mussolini, which happened 10 years earlier. At first, Hitler’s admiration for the Italian dictator was sincere, which could not be said to work in the opposite direction: Benito Mussolini did not share Hitler’s ideas about the supremacy of the Aryan race, nor did the anti-Semitic politics driven to extreme. They would eventually become close only after a series of conflicts and events.

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9 In German, in the abridged version, the law was named Ermächtigungsgesetz, the formal title being Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich, which means “Law to remedy the distress of people and Reich”.
10 Pavel Moraru, Relațiile internaționale în anii 1914-1947, Editura Militară, București, p. 120.
of reciprocal visits. The alliance began to grow with the signing of the collaboration treaty called the Rome-Berlin Axis (25 October 1936)\(^{11}\) and Italy’s accession to the Antikomintern\(^{12}\) Pact, on 6 November 1937. In 1940, the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis was established in Berlin, with a “validity period” of 10 years.

From the politico-military perspective, the Axis lacked common overall objectives (“ends”), viable and affordable strategies (“means”) and effective coordination of military efforts (“ways”). The Tripartite Pact signed in Berlin on 27 September 1940 by Adolf Hitler for Germany, Saburō Kurusu for Japan and Galeazzo Ciano for Italy recorded only on paper the establishment of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis. In reality, the alliance concluded among the three countries was separated not only by geographical distances but also by ideological and cultural differences, by divergence of overall objectives and ways to achieve them. Obtaining vital space for the German Aryan race (‘Lebensraum’) never matched the Italians’ desire to restore

\(^{11}\) The document was drafted at the initiative of Italian Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, and was formalised in 1939 through the Pact of Steel (Stahlpakt).

\(^{12}\) Signed initially between Germany and Japan, on 25 November 1936.

\(^{13}\) Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=22411034

\(^{14}\) The Tripartite Pact, also the Three-Power Pact, Axis Pact, Three-way Pact or Tripartite Treaty was a pact signed in Berlin, Germany on 27 September 1940, which established the Axis Powers of the Second World War. The pact was signed by representatives of Nazi Germany (Adolf Hitler), Fascist Italy (foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano), and Imperial Japan (Japanese ambassador to Germany Saburō Kurusu). The Tripartite Pact was subsequently joined by Hungary (20 November 1940), Romania (23 November 1940), Slovakia (24 November 1940), Bulgaria (1 March 1941, prior to the arrival of German troops), Yugoslavia (25 March 1941), and Croatia (15 June 1941).
the greatness of the long ago fallen Roman Empire or desperate Japanese rush for resources.

Analysed in terms of war alliances and coalitions, as defined by modern military specialists\textsuperscript{15}, the Tripartite Pact can be rather considered an agreement for political, military and economic assistance than an alliance or coalition among the three powers, given the fact that each of them acted almost independently for the achievement of their particular goals. Even the “new order” term promoted by the Tripartite Pact did not reflect the idea of commonality, the three powers clearly defining their areas of influence and action – Europe for Germany and Italy and “Greater East Asia” for Japan\textsuperscript{16}. Furthermore, there was neither consultation in the Axis before triggering hostilities nor real reciprocal assistance during their development. Hitler showed absolutely “no interest in allowing Japan to take part in Barbarossa while Japanese leaders did not even inform him of the impeding attack on Pearl Harbour, any more than Mussolini warned Hitler of his attack on Greece, or Hitler told Mussolini of his invasion of Yugoslavia”\textsuperscript{17}. The Axis powers were disunited not only politically but also militarily, as the strategic errors committed by their leaders had both politic and military impact and eventually rushed the end of the war to their detriment.

None of the three Axis powers possessed a “grand strategy” on the conduct of war, a coherent idea of “distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy”, as defined by Liddell Hart and raised to the level of “art”\textsuperscript{18}. The early victories of the war of each of the three states were individual achievements rather than reflecting a coherent, continuous and uniform vision of war. Germany started the war gloriously and full of promises (for Axis side) but lost it on hand of Hitler and his unforgivable errors. Stalin once considered the Fuhrer as “a very able man” but Hitler was no genius, militarily speaking. He was a “dilettante, interested in small details, and he wanted to hold

\textsuperscript{15} Patricia A. Weitsman, Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{16} The Tripartite Pact stated that: Japan recognizes and respects the leadership of Germany and Italy in the establishment of a new order in Europe (Article 1) and Germany and Italy recognize and respect the leadership of Japan in the establishment of a new order in Greater East Asia (Article 2).

\textsuperscript{17} Andrew Roberts, The Storm of War: a New History of the Second World War, p. 588.

\textsuperscript{18} Michael Howard, The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy, p. 975.
everything, stubborn, dour, hold everything to the last”\textsuperscript{19}. He made impulsive decisions, sometimes with fury or recklessness, sometimes with conceit given by the easy successes achieved in the early war campaigns, which resulted in the loss of millions of lives on both sides. Most probably, anger drove Hitler to order Luftwaffe to attack British cities in response to the bombing of Berlin, but this first mistake “cost” him the chance to put any German boots on English soil. What started as a successful “extensive experiment to test the ‘strategic-bombing’ theory espoused after World War I by [...] Giulio Douhet”\textsuperscript{20} ended lamentably by losing the Battle of Britain. While uncalculated decision probably led to the loss of the Battle of Britain, there was definitely conceit when Germany decided to invade Russia and recklessness when it declared war to the United States – two errors which might be considered as crucial for the defeat of the Nazis. Even failing to defeat Great Britain on the Western front, Hitler launched himself in 1941 in a new and dangerous “adventure” against the Soviet Union. Taking into consideration that Germany had suffered devastating consequences because of a two-front war only two decades before, it is inexplicable why Hitler chose to risk the same approach. German military leaders acknowledged that speed was the essence of success, but the idea of rapid war (“blitzkrieg”) that worked perfectly in finite and crowded spaces on the Western Front proved ineffective this time in the boundless steppes of Russia. The combination of stubborn resistance of Soviets over an expanded front and extremely bad weather caused Operation Barbarossa to fail. It was not the beginning of the end, but it was definitely the end of the beginning for Germany, its defeat on the Eastern Front terminating the belief that the Nazis were led by a providential and invincible leader. Less than six months later, Germany made another capital mistake, by declaring war against the United States. It is unlikely to consider that President Roosevelt could have got the support of the Congress for starting a war against Germany when he had already asked for a declaration of war against Japan. This would have considerably reduced the US involvement in the European theatre of operations. Although Germany was, at the time, blocked in the war against the British and the Soviets, Hitler did not hesitate to start

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p. 583.
a conflict with a country that was virtually untouchable, especially after the withdrawal of U-boat submarines from the Atlantic Ocean. Either he did not consider the real military potential of the Americans or he believed that a war against Japan would weaken the American power enough not to threaten the European front. The reality proved to be cruel for the Germans and the US involvement in Europe hastened the end of Second World War.

In the first two years of war, the Axis armed forces were able to achieve most of the proposed objectives, especially due to the ingenuity of using strategic surprise and concentration of forces, the aggressiveness showed at tactical level, combining the destructive power of all services in an unprecedented way. In the summer of 1942, however, there was a major deadlock in all theatres of operations, especially in Russia. It can be said, according to most of the researchers who studied the unfolding of the second world conflagration, that due to the wrong strategy implemented at that time at Adolf Hitler’s insistence, Germany lost the war beginning with November 1942, with the success of the Red Army’s Uranus operation, which disintegrated the Axis forces massed in the Stalingrad area. Concerning the subject of Hitler’s involvement in the strategic planning of the German armed forces, French historian Benoit Bihan gives us an unequivocal explanation: “A discussion regarding the German strategy during the Second World War does not make us state that Hitler stayed in the way of the success of a good strategy, but makes us wonder about the resorts that allowed the Fuhrer to attract Germany in a project whose evolution could not have been different from what it was”.

Beyond the strategic errors of their leaders, the Axis powers lacked cooperation and co-ordination of their military efforts. In the article Wartime Alliances versus Coalition Warfare, Patricia A. Wiesman stated that “coalitions and wartime alliances are both subsets of multinational operations” and “any multinational operation requires coordination in command and control and mutual cooperation in ideas and actions”. Unbelievably lucky for the Allies, this was not the case in the situation of Axis Powers. The stubbornness and overconfidence

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of the Axis leaders determined them to adopt an “individualism” policy for their operations, probably in the idea of not sharing the laurels of their already flawless envisaged victories. A “better military coordination between Berlin, Rome and Tokyo should have ensured the Japanese attacked not the Americans but rather the Russians as soon as Germany was ready”\textsuperscript{23}. Nevertheless, the socio-economic blunders of the Axis powers “complemented” the politico-military ones.

**The socio-economic perspective**

Each Axis power lacked a sufficiently strong economy able to support the presumed war effort. Even before the war, in 1938, the Axis powers had, together with the colonies, a GDP lower than that of France, Britain, their colonies, Poland and Czechoslovakia: $750 billion compared to $1024\textsuperscript{24}, without considering China, which was already at war with Japan, and which alone had a GDP higher than the Japanese Empire. Indeed, the gross domestic product does not necessarily represent an indicator of military power, especially in the present case, in which the Axis powers focused their economies on war production years before, but they provide clear indications on the capacity to support the war effort in the long term. After the USSR and the US entered the war (and Finland, Hungary and Romania, on the Axis side), the balance tilted even more towards the Allies, although, at the level of 1942, due to the huge territorial gains of the German and Japanese armed forces, the difference was not huge: the Axis powers (including the occupied territories) had a GDP of $1552 billion dollars, while the Allies had $2069 billion dollars\textsuperscript{25}.

As for war production, the data here are significant. If we consider the production of tanks and self-propelled guns, the difference is huge, 4:1 in favour of the Allies (between 1939 and 1945, they produced over 230,000 units, while the Axis powers only 55,000). As far as combat aircraft are concerned, the situation is similar: the Allies produced over 400,000 aircraft, while the aeronautical industry of the Axis only

\textsuperscript{23} Michael Howard, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p. 23.
160,000 (the US production alone, of over 190,000 units, exceeded the entire production of the Axis by almost 30%)\textsuperscript{26}.

But perhaps no other indicator could be more relevant to anyone who tried to predict the fate of war, even from the very beginning, than oil: while the Allies had access to 80\% of world resources, Germany relied only on the Romanian resources and on the limited capacity to produce synthetic gasoline. As historian Jacques de Launay also noted, after August 1944, when the Romanian armed forces took over the refineries in the Ploiești area, Germany was able to cover only 10-20\% of its needs\textsuperscript{27}.

In other words, there was no real correlation between the level of ambition and the available possibilities of the Axis. It was most probably lack of resources in the case of Japan or the undeveloped economy for Italy. Instead, Germany had both economic capacity and resources but it did not know how to use them intelligently. If Germany had not “\textit{ad infinitum}” delayed the implementation of advanced technologies, it would have been able to counter the attacks of allied forces. Finally, if Germany had used the available human and material resources at their full potential rather than destroying or using them for purposes other than the war, the flow of war would have been probably different. Hitler did not prove to have a sound mind when he “ran” for the Final Solution. Clausewitz’s theory recommends “\textit{the use of engagements for the purpose of war}”\textsuperscript{28}. Hitler did not do this. The Final Solution absorbed most of his attention and used the bulk of resources available to the Third Reich. Beyond the atrocities committed, the extermination of millions of Jews and Gypsies, and the murder of other millions of civilians and prisoners of war, Hitler’s plans “\textit{deprived Germany of the labour and mental contributions of potentially valuable workers and took immense amounts of transportation, resources, personnel, and energy badly needed for the war effort}”\textsuperscript{29}. Furthermore, the severe economic measures and rationalisations imposed by Nazis on the occupied territories and even on their allies triggered hostile reactions

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid}, p. 26.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Jacques de Launay, \textit{Mari decizii ale celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial}, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1988, p. 113.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Carl von Clausewitz, \textit{On War}, p. 177.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Michael Howard, \textit{op. cit.}
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from the people of these countries, which subsequently turned against Germany. Nevertheless, the engagement in the war against Soviet Union without adequate logistical support and the declaration of war against the United States – a nation able to produce five times more weapons than Nazi Germany – were not likely to enhance the economic situation of the Axis Powers.

Conclusions

There will never be enough available space to allow an extensive meaning to the causes that led to the defeat of the Axis Powers in the Second World War. There are many who believe that the Axis powers were defeated by the tenacity of United States and Great Britain. Others could give this crucial credit to the Soviet Union. Any of these ideas could be considered viable with adequate support. In our opinion, the Axis lost the war because of the indecisions and blunders of their leaders, the poor coordination of military efforts, the effects produced by the extreme antisocial measures adopted, and the impossibility to ensure proper economic support to the war machine. In this regard, Germany gave us the best examples. However, surprisingly or not, in spite of the Fuhrer’s bad decisions, the Germans resisted for six years against a coalition of the most powerful countries in the world. It was most probably the merit of the German troops, who showed remarkable discipline throughout the entire war. But no Army in the world could have carried out the diabolical plans of an inhumane leader, who, from the moment he lost contact with reality, took refuge in an ideological reclusion that proved to be so destructive for the entire planet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY