

Sleepwalking Toward Armageddon

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Saede Riordan

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Part of the Series: Extinction

See that little stream — we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it — a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation.

It was a bright and sunny Monday morning. Air raid sirens had sounded through part of the night and again closer to dawn but as the sun rose into a clear blue sky, the calm had returned. People had begun going to work and children had just started their days at school when a new star was born 1,900 feet over the city of Hiroshima.

At 8:15 am on August 6th, 1945, An American B-29 bomber nicknamed the *Enola Gay* dropped the Little Boy nuclear weapon on an unsuspecting Japanese metropolis. Forty-five seconds later, 70,000 people were instantly incinerated as a mile wide atomic fireball vaporized the center of the city and sent shockwaves filled with radioactive debris radiating outwards for miles in every direction. The blast ignited a firestorm that would burn for much of the day and destroy what little of the original downtown had survived, churning the air with radioactive dust and ash.

In the following days' American president Harry Truman would issue a dire warning to Japan:

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in the first attack to avoid insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her war industries and unfortunately thousands of civilian lives will be lost. I urge Japanese civilians to leave industrial cities immediately and save themselves from destruction.

Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbour, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretence of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war; in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans. We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us. ...

Japan did not surrender. Three days later, on August 9th, Soviet tanks began to roll into Japanese occupied Manchuria, while in Japan another fireball would obliterate the city of Nagasaki, instantly killing another 40,000 people. The death tolls from injuries and radiation exposure from the atomic weapons would continue ticking upwards for months, and although the true death counts may never be known it is estimated that between them the two bombs killed on the order of 220,000 people by the time their grisly work was done.

A world already shattered by thirty years of global war looked on in shock, awe, and horror as the deadly flower of atomic weapons blossomed in anger for the first and only time in the history of our species. World leaders talked about the possible end of civilization if these weapons continued to be brought to bear, and on August 14, three days before the next bombs were scheduled to be deployed, Japan finally surrendered.

Despite the best that has been done by every one—the gallant fighting of military and naval forces, the diligence and assiduity of Our servants of the State and the devoted service of Our one hundred million people, the war situation has developed not necessarily to Japan's advantage, while the general trends of the world have all turned against her interest. Moreover, the enemy now possesses a new and terrible weapon with the power to destroy many innocent lives and do incalculable damage. Should we continue to fight, not only would it result in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also it would lead to the total extinction of human civilization. Such being the case, how are we to save the millions of our subjects, or to atone ourselves before the hallowed spirits of our imperial ancestors? This is the reason why we have ordered the acceptance of the provisions of the joint declaration of the powers.

With that, the deadliest conflict in human history was brought to a close. 75 million people were dead, over half of them civilians who had either been caught on the crossfire or who suffered from famine, disease, and deliberate acts of genocide.

Between the first and second world wars, the death toll was around one hundred million. One hundred million people dead in thirty years. These were conflicts unlike any the world had seen before or would see after. There has not been another global war since.

This western-front business couldn't be done again, not for a long time. The young men think they could do it but they couldn't. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. The Russians and Italians weren't any good on this front. You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather's whiskers.

What does it take to fight a world war? Where does the willingness to march forward into the surety of death come from? What makes a leader willingly throw their nations into so terrible a battle?

Alfred Korzybski described the world wars as a result of technology escaping from humanity, accelerating in development faster than human morality, wisdom, law, or economics could keep up, and then snapping and rebounding back into equilibrium in the form of mass violence and death.

The rebound from the first world war set the stage for the snap that led to the second world war, and when the second world war ended, the world nearly stood poised to begin yet another massive conflict, this time between the United States and the Soviet Union.

But technology continued to march forwards. The atomic bombs were dropped, and everything changed again. While there has not been another rebound since, Korzybski's warning continues to ominously ring from the church steeple. In the 75 years since the end of the last global war, the tension has slowly increased, like a fault line under ever-increasing tectonic pressure.

However, this technological tension was not the only decoupling which allowed the world wars to occur. There is another factor in the willingness to wage a global war that must not be overlooked.

This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling and marraines in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Wurtemberg and Westphalia. Why, this was a love battle — there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle.

Many people and even some rationalists will argue that the development of the atomic bomb has made the world more peaceful. They argue that it has brought an end to war, that a future world war could not happen without destroying the world and thus the threat of total global war is diminished. Where have we heard this before?

There is no one alive today who remembers the first world war, and few remain who remember the second, a number shrinking constantly and which with the new global pandemic sweeping the world may soon vanish completely.

Gone with them has been the direct experience of living through a world war. No one from the following generations can ever truly understand what it was like to live through those days. Even the baby boomers whose parents told gallant and heroic stories of fighting Nazis were insulated from the true horrors of war. They grew up in a world where the largest armed conflicts were localized brushfires like Vietnam and Korea. Even with the threat of mutually assured destruction by atomic weapons looming overhead like a storm about to break, the people of the following generations still grew up not knowing what a true global war would be like.

Like the European powers of the last century, we became disconnected from the direct experiences of total war. We dissociated from the realities of a conflict that would pit the full might of industrialized superpowers into one another's destruction. We have no idea what a global war is like, it is completely outside of our scope of experience.

Technology continues to accelerate away from humanity, while humanity has lingered in the pre-atomic paradigms of economics, politics, law, and ethics. We are still living in the past and the more time that passes the further ahead of us our technology races.

Moreover, we have decoupled ourselves from the realities and horrors of our technology. We don't meaningfully acknowledge the harms they could inflict. We have forgotten how bad war can be, and in doing so, we make ourselves poised and willing to begin one again. It has been a century since the last love battle and enough time has passed, enough generations have passed in peace and plenty, that we have once more grown willing to wage such a conflict. We have forgotten war, but war will not forget us.

Unless the cardinal concerns of mankind are brought into equilibria by some art and science of human engineering, it is not a matter of if but a matter of when the next snap occurs. When it comes, the next rebound might not be survivable at all.

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