

politique étrangère

THE GREAT WAR

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AND THE WORLD
OF TOMORROW

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World War I, in Theory

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What is the significance of the First World War to International Relations (IR) theory? We argue that World War I planted the seeds for International Relations theory, but it was World War II and the Cold War that fostered its growth. By exposing shocking deficiencies in thinking about world politics, World War I drastically expanded the audience for IR thought, stimulated academic study of the subject, and set the scene for the ferment that followed. The First World War remains a critical case in IR research and a fertile basis for arguments on the causes and course of war and peace. But its central place in the field is increasingly contested because of the nuclear revolution, the disintegrative force of nationalism, and the salience of terrorism.

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It has been nearly a century since World War I began its four-year reign of terror on the European continent. None of the soldiers who lived through the carnage have survived to mark its centennial. Cities and nations have been rebuilt, destroyed, and rebuilt again. Yet while remnants of the Great War decay, scholars continue to struggle over the carcass. These fights have neither been inconclusive nor inconsequential. As Dale Copeland observes, “World War I is probably the most analyzed and contested case in international relations scholarship.”¹ For better or worse, consciously or unconsciously, these debates helped structure how we think about present problems and how we shape future policies.

The authors would like to thank Étienne de Durand, Katie Karas, Paul MacDonald, and Sebastian Rosato. 1. Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 56; cf. Keir Lieber, “The New History of World War I and What It Means for International Relations Theory” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), p. 155.

But what is the continuing significance of the First World War on International Relations (IR) thought? We argue that World War I laid the foundation for modern IR theory, but it was World War II and the Cold War that built the field. The First World War was a critical first step in the search for knowledge, but it was part of an evolutionary process that accelerated a generation later. In some ways, World War I is still with us as a rich resource of how the world works, but in other ways the case is an awkward fit in a world with nuclear weapons, disintegrative nationalism, and modern terrorism.

Period portraits

To fully understand World War I's legacy we must first paint a picture of IR thought through the ages. Doing so produces a triptych, its three images separated by the first and second world wars. In the first image, all will recognize the classical thinkers on the causes and conduct of war: Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, among others. Most will also recognize that these thinkers occupy the same role in political science played by Aristotle, da Vinci, and Newton in current science. Perhaps fewer notice that these authors were either practitioners or historians. Our second image captures fewer familiar faces, a smattering of geopoliticians and proto-theorists: A.T. Mahan, Halford Mackinder, Friedrich Meinecke, Otto Hintze, Carl Schmitt, and E.H. Carr. Although many of these authors are still quoted, only Carr and Schmitt remain widely read. The final image marks a return to the recognizable, with the discipline's leading theorists seated comfortably in their academic chairs: Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Arnold Wolfers, Kenneth Waltz, Thomas Schelling, Robert Gilpin, Robert Keohane, John Mearsheimer, and James Fearon.

The divisions in our painting reflect obvious changes in the division of labor. Even in the marketplace of ideas, the extent of the market determines the degree of specialization. Over time the world grew in population, wealth, and complexity, and the discipline responded in kind. Herodotus's work had to be nearly all things to all people. This is no longer practical or possible with increased competition and attention. Even Waltz's magnum opus, *Theory of International Politics*, restricted itself to an abstract theory of long-term, great power, systemic outcomes.

However, the full story is not so straightforward. As our triptych suggests, the field did not emerge gradually; the birth of the discipline came via emergency delivery after World War I. The abundance of clear victims and dearth of clear victors and villains remorselessly rebuked prevailing

notions of progress, civilization, and political control. This systemic shock stimulated demand for remedies for the international system, which spawned a sprawling literature on the causes and conduct of war and politics. Indeed, the first Department of International Relations was founded in 1919 at Aberystwyth University (then called University College, Wales), thanks to an endowment given “as a memorial to the students killed and wounded in the First World War”².

Perhaps surprisingly, all the seeds planted by World War I bore little fruit until after World War II. The who’s who of the field in the 1920s and 30s (e.g. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson and Nicholas Murray Butler) would now only elicit a “who?” Today a dedicated IR faculty with PhDs and peer-reviewed publications is a prerequisite for any self-respecting institution. Before the Second World War, nearly no top universities had them.

It is nearly impossible to determine why this is so. Perhaps hopes of a brighter future blinded scholars from seeing ugly truths. Conceivably, the search for knowledge took time to ripen, and the blossoming of IR thought after World War II was coincidental. More likely, the escalating costs of World War II and the threat of nuclear Armageddon raised the stakes, broadened the audience, increased specialization, sharpened competition, and attracted better funding and talent. Yet the costs of World War I were already incredibly high for Europe—around ten percent of the active male population died in France, Germany, and Austria-Hungary³—and probably provided ample ignition for the field. Of course, these explanations are neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

Regardless, IR theory and World War I historiography have held a steady conversation for nearly a century. Fortunately, World War I remains one of the few great power wars in recent history. Even if IR thought advanced little in the decades after 1918, World War I was nevertheless a crucial case on which theories were formulated and tested, which has illuminated our understanding of the conduct of war, the causes of war, and the causes of peace. We examine each, respectively.

Conduct of war

IR theorists are interested in the conduct of World War I because it casts a long shadow on bargaining theory and political outcomes. Conventional wisdom holds that the conduct of the war was unenlightened, that “lions

2. <www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/about/>.

3. See statistics in Judith M. Hughes, *To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparation in the 1920's* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 12.

were led by donkeys.” This wisdom is itself unenlightened. Doubtless military leaders made mistakes, but it would be strange if there were little invention in the face of such enormous necessity. Likely the bleeding stalemate suggested retrograde progress, yet that does not capture the more captivating reality.

Technologically, the world witnessed mass deployment of many weapons systems that would define the coming decades—planes, tanks, and submarines—and, tactically, it saw continual improvement. World War I is often cited as a prime example of a “defense-dominant world”, where military technology rendered decisive operations impossible. The mass deployment of machine guns and barbed wire may have made deep penetration prohibitively expensive. Nonetheless, the technological balance was not self-evident to either side. Stephen Biddle demonstrates that swift learning helped stalemate the Western Front. Today’s gold standard of conventional war fighting, what Biddle calls “the modern system,” was born in the merciless crucible of World War I. Small unit tactics, combined arms, cover, and concealment were the only ways to take and hold territory against the storm of steel that new technologies unleashed. While these tactics were perfected into blitzkrieg in World War II, they were forged in the unforgiving fields of Flanders.

Outlawed before the war and rarely seen since, chemical weapons were also widely used during the war. It remains unclear if the absence of chemical weapons derives from their unpopularity or ineffectiveness. Scholars favoring the former attribute their disappearance to social factors, such as a taboo on the use of chemical weapons or the mutual fear for each side’s noncombatants. Others attribute their disuse to its military ineffectiveness, and point to Nazi Germany’s use of gas, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Syrian Civil War as instances that undermine the taboo’s relevance. Though there is spirited disagreement on the causes and importance of the chemical weapons taboo, no one disputes World War I’s centrality in discrediting their use.

Outside the European theater, T.E. Lawrence was unearthing the lost logic of guerilla warfare. His still read “27 Articles” attracted wide readership, Mao Zedong most famously. Since World War I, irregular fighting has been a significant portion of major conflict and shows no sign of slowing, prompting some to question the appropriateness of its name. In fact, some argue conventional deterrence is so resilient that troop training should prioritize unconventional fighting over conventional fighting. Others contend the mechanization that attends the modern system impedes conventional

forces from overcoming unconventional opponents.⁴ Nevertheless, despite all the astounding inventions of the past century, World War I continues to be a grim textbook of tactical instruction, and therefore required reading for IR theorists.

Contributions from outside the European theater went well beyond the theoretical. Millions of colonial soldiers served the Allied war effort and deserve a fair share of the credit for victory. While Europeans mouthed pieties about justice and national greatness, non-Europeans bled for empires that treated them as second-class citizens. A young Hitler was struck by the vast manpower reserves that the British Empire could call upon, but the German Empire, lacking the equivalent *Lebensraum*, could not. While this had little direct impact on IR theory, it drove events that would provoke IR theory on issues like nationalism, ethnic conflict, and the optimal size of states. When World War II erupted, colonies would be in an increasingly advantageous position to resist empires because of the ideological diffusion facilitated by, and the financial strain accumulated from, World War I.

In short, World War I was an important learning experience for winners and losers. The lessons learned would later serve as the building blocks of both blitzkrieg and modern guerilla warfare tactics. They would also help curtail imperialism and chemical weapons, and arguably propel World War II. Those who listen closely to the continuing conversation concerning the conduct of war will hear echoes from the Great War. However, World War I is even more indispensable in conversations on the causes of war.

Causes of war

The main questions surrounding World War I—whether it was intentional, avoidable, or anomalous—lie at the core of international relations theory. It is therefore unsurprising that the explanations of the war closely correspond to the three leading schools of thought: constructivism, liberalism, and realism. Their respective causal mechanisms—ideas, domestic politics, and anarchy—represent the three chief explanations on the causes of World War I.

Perhaps the most prominent ideas argument is the “cult of the offensive” argument. According to this logic, leaders foolishly stood firm on a poorly grounded belief system that moral factors could triumph over material

4. See Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 67-106; cf. Paul K. MacDonald, “Retribution Must Succeed Rebellion”: The Colonial Origins of Counterinsurgency Failure,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 253-286.

factors and offense held the advantage.⁵ This dogma was so dominant that leaders remained recalcitrant to the reality of galling losses. Another variant looks to the *Zeitgeist*: social Darwinism, imperial nationalism, and dueling notions of economic and political organization. Elites viewed the world in organic tropes: states must either be rising or declining, and a failure to grow meant inexorable death. Their political and economic systems needed a “place in the sun” and any opposition—in the core or periphery—had to be overcome to ensure survival.

There are several rebuttals to these claims. One is that these arguments misread the evidence. The abiding evidence of these arguments is mixed and controversial, and the historiography continues to be contentious. As expected, decision-makers framed the world quite differently in the past, but it is unclear how causally important a cult of the offensive was in the war’s outbreak. Similarly, arguments that leaders misperceived the technological balance may themselves rest on misperceptions. Although the war ground to a grueling standoff, tactical breakthroughs did happen, and effectively the same technology was used in World War II to take and hold huge swaths of territory.

Another is that these ideas are outmoded. Many of the renowned Darwinists were pacifists, and many wars before and since have passed without mention of Darwinist ideas. Social Darwinism (and its cousin, eugenics) fell from favor long ago and survives only underground and on the fringes of the world, while the recurrence of war has remained front and center. Furthermore, nationalism has been turned inside out in the last century. Formerly an anthem of imperialism, nationalism became the rallying cry of separatists and decolonizers. Up until the First World War, the number of states in the world had been declining for centuries. Shortly after, the number of states increased steadily as decolonizers racked up victories—a trend that shows no sign of abating. The astute may note that Balkan separatists played a feature role in war, but should remember it was still a supporting one, providing a pretext for great power expansion.

Yet another is that ideas were epiphenomenal. Ideas appeared to alter quickly as high casualties transformed both the character of the conflict and the combatants. On all sides, the war became a crusade, a war to end all wars, a war to make the world safe for democracy, a defense of the true meaning of culture and freedom. For the Allies, the decency and democratic

5. See Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War Power and the Roots of Conflict*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

nature of the German Realm (the name “Imperial Germany” was given posthumously) declined as the death toll rose. Indeed, President Woodrow Wilson may have rued that Professor Woodrow Wilson described Bismarck as “creative”, “insightful”, and “energetic,” and Berlin as “the most perfect flower of the Prussian municipal system.”⁶

The second type of explanation centers on domestic politics, especially bureaucratic politics. The war was triggered or hastened by mobilization requirements: war by timetable. Or military leaders adopted offensive doctrines for bureaucratic reasons: autonomy, prestige, and budgets.⁷ Bureaucratic pathologies swayed crisis diplomacy. There may be something to weaker versions of this argument, but it has not found much support of late. We certainly see service chiefs battling for budgets and deference to commanders and “conditions on the ground,” but as a cause of great power war bureaucratic politics has not weathered well. Leaders understood the consequences of mobilization and that there were alternatives to offense à outrance.

The third type of explanation relates to the security dilemma. Though the concept was intimated by Herodotus and Thucydides and not formally named until after World War II, World War I remains a textbook case. The security dilemma is a “structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and the measures of others as potentially threatening.”⁸ The security dilemma is a root cause of war, the essence of arms races, and above all the tragedy of international politics.

At bottom, the security dilemma is about the moves and countermoves of balance of power politics. Conventionally, there are two kinds of balancing: internal and external. Internal balancing involves trying to offset the advantages of others through domestic policies such as military spending, research and development, and doctrinal innovation or imitation. External balancing refers to blunting rivals’ power through political alignments and alliance portfolios, either siding with the weak against the strong or using wedge strategies to sap the strength of opposing coalitions.

6. Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and Us: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 38, 40-41.

7. See Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

8. See John H. Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (January 1950): pp. 171-201, p. 175; cf. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma”, *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1978): pp. 167-214.

Internal balancing was on full display prior to World War I. Great powers duelled with defense budgets, procured parallel weapons technologies, and most conspicuously there was the Anglo-German naval arms race. Presently, internal balancing appears only in attenuated form. Chinese defense spending and technology aspires to American levels, but places its hopes in the future. Contemporary European powers have first-rate capabilities in third-rate quantities, and show little desire to catch up.

Externally, the World War I alliance system remains the model of entangling alliances. When Germany pushed Russia out of the *Dreikaiserbund*, the Franco-Russian alliance formed, which gradually pressed the Germans and Austro-Hungarians together, which led to the courtship of Britain, then the formation of the *Entente Cordiale*, and efforts to pull Italy away from Germany. By the time the alliances stood toe-to-toe, they were approximately equal in size and strength. Realists explain this as a battle about polarity. World War I was a fight over incipient bipolarity, a bid for continental hegemony, and an unstable moment of transition as Germany's rise was jeopardized by Russia's looming ascent. Others were forced to pick sides because the rules of great power politics were up for grabs.

History fails to color completely within the lines of this theory. There were long delays between moves and countermoves; a fair amount of financial cooperation and diplomatic blandishment between blocs; and substantial reluctance to fight for alliance partners. Russia repeatedly reminded France that it would not partake in a war of revenge over Alsace-Lorraine. France repeatedly responded that it could offer silver words but no real steel for Russian adventurism in the Far East. Britain and Germany almost aligned more than once. Britain and Russia approached rupture on the eve of war. There is a lot more fluidity than the entangling alliances story suggests. Systematic study of shifts in great power rank finds a negative relationship between conflict and ordinal transitions.⁹

Since the end of the Cold War, alliances have grown more nebulous as great power peace has remained robust, though the rise of China is beginning to test that. Scholars still debate whether multipolarity, bipolarity, or unipolarity is most conflict prone, but the data is not dispositive. There are good grounds to believe that polarity adeptly explains the attraction and repulsion of great powers and why competing blocs broadly line up as they do. But conflict and competition are not equivalent to war, and polarity has not provided a persuasive account for why and when system-wide wars flare up.

9. See Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Spring 2011), p. 33.

In sum, World War I is such an engrossing case because almost everything contributes to the carnage: technology suggested victory could come quickly, leaders exercised poor judgment and oversight, the ideological atmosphere was a toxic froth of reckless fantasies, bureaucracies put parochial over national interests, and the horns of the security dilemma could not be drawn in. Some of these explanations receive more empirical support than others, but when everything goes wrong simultaneously causal priority becomes difficult to disentangle. Moreover, the world has changed since 1914. Even perfect understanding of the past could produce flawed policy in the present.

Causes of peace

It is hard to overstate the difficulties facing leaders following World War I: social upheaval, revolutionary Russia, Pyrrhic victory, unrepentant losers, unclear responsibility (to say nothing of guilt), unstable great power relations, ruinous financial consequences, political disengagement, a calamitous pandemic, and a demographic catastrophe. Although there is plenty of evidence to make indictments, scholars have grown more sympathetic to the peace-makers' efforts with time. Tellingly, our store of ideas about the causes of peace has shifted little in a century.

The major ideas behind the causes of peace antedate 1918, but our thoughts about the policy incarnations of them begin primarily in the period following. The traditional mainstay of peace had been military deterrence, a shorthand for balancing. But some victors were wary of heavy reliance on deterrence because arms racing and entangling alliances were blamed for the collective disaster. However, this was mostly a matter of emphasis. Regardless of principles or loyalties, deterrence remained an unavoidable component of postwar policies. For instance, with German power depressed, the British fretted that France would act aggressively and worried that French aerial capability would threaten the isles. The British shifted their defense resources accordingly.

The larger departures from history were in international legalism.¹⁰ Its showpiece was the League of Nations, but this should not detract attention from the supporting ligatures. This was to be a more inclusive, rule-bound order, with more trade and self-determination, as was reflected

10. See Jack Donnelly, "Realism and the Academic Study of International Relations" in James Farr, John S. Dryzek, Stephen T. Leonard, *Political Science in History: Research Programs and Political Traditions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 179, also pp. 175-195; cp. Brian C. Schmidt, "Anarchy, World Politics, and the Birth of a Discipline: American International Relations, Pluralist Theory and the Myth of Interwar Idealism", *International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 2002), pp. 9-31

in the seating at Versailles. To the right of the United States sat, in order: Uruguay, France, Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Portugal, Italy, Peru, Haiti, Greece, Belgium, Cuba, and Brazil. Of course this was more a matter of style than substance. The great power victors seldom consulted others and blithely touted national self-determination without a strong consensus of what that truly meant, especially in imperial spheres of influence such as Latin America and the Middle East.

International legalism was pushed furthest by Woodrow Wilson. In his conception, there was no difference between good international ethics and good domestic ethics. International law should and could be public, transparent, and much like domestic law (or more accurately, his unique conception of the Golden Rule—Wilson was the dutiful son of a Southern minister, with all the accompanying freight.) Here is not the place to recite the Fourteen Points or Wilson's daft failure to ensure U.S. membership in the League of Nations. What is important is that Wilson laid out the three liberal pillars of peace at Versailles—democracy promotion, free trade, and international law—and was powerful enough to implement some commitment to each in the terms of the final settlement.¹¹ The fledgling efforts toward each proved frail and collapsed under the crosswinds of depression and rearmament. Yet all three were resurrected after the Second World War and took wing under more auspicious circumstances, by some accounts soaring higher after the Cold War.

It is worth noting that disarmament was a substantial element in the Versailles Treaty and one that carried through much of the Interwar period. Again, this was nothing original to the period—the Tsar had surprised the world by proposing the 1899 Hague Conference—but it did color how IR theory views arms control. The highest profile events were naval disarmament talks at Washington, Geneva, and London, which did manage to curb Germany and Japan's fleets. However, these minor immediate successes sowed rancor among the future allies and created incentives for Germany and Japan to innovate with submarines and aircraft carriers. Later experiments with nuclear arms control were more successful, but the Interwar attempts at disarmament weigh about as heavily on the liability side of the ledger.

On balance, it is hard to judge which of the causes of peace account for the longest recorded period of great power peace. All four of them—deterrence, democracy, trade, and international law—fail in the case of World

11. See Michael W. Doyle, "Three Pillars of the Liberal Peace" *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (August 2005), pp. 463-466; cp. Sebastian Rosato "Explaining the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (August 2005), pp. 467-472.

War II. All four of them grow in strength following 1945. Conventional and nuclear deterrence became fairly sturdy during the Cold War. The number of democracies burgeons under the American aegis, and the pitiless unmixing of peoples and postwar ethnic cleansing brought national self-determination to an agonizing, albeit generally stable, culmination. Likewise, the global economy blossomed under bipolarity and unipolarity, and complex interdependence undercut the calculus for conflict.¹² And the United Nations has made some progress, particularly after the Cold War, in managing conflict.¹³ The most compelling argument is that these factors are reinforcing.¹⁴

Conclusion

World War I represents the birth of IR as a discipline. Like any adolescence, IR's youth was filled with optimism, distraction, and missteps. Yet these growing pains helped the field learn and grow. Old enough to know better, IR theory can wince at some of its indiscretions: unenlightened conventional wisdoms, misperceptions about misperceptions, and spiraling debates over a concept predicting spirals of competition. Disciplines move forward if only by avoiding past missteps.

Yet fields evolve with events, and IR appears to be doing so. According to no less an authority than Kenneth Waltz, nuclear weapons have revolutionized international relations by nearly eliminating the prospect of great power war. This revolution conjures up Nietzsche's nightmare of the last man, as high politics withdraws backstage and low politics commands the scene.

Relatedly, the transformation of nationalism is driving a reformation of both the international system and the theories that describe it. As interstate wars wane, intrastate wars wax. Journals once consumed with great power conflict have lost their appetite for it, preferring to glut on civil wars. Similarly, the mammoth empires of the past appear an endangered species and few have mourned their passing. Formal empires are extinct and debate regarding the existence of informal ones suggests they too might soon join their brethren. The world's largest states—China, India, and the United States—find unity increasingly elusive. Amidst cries for

12. See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 2nd edn. (New York: Addison, Wesley, Longman, 1989); cp. Carl Kaysen, "Is War Obsolete? A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Spring 1990), pp. 42-64.

13. See Virginia Page Fortna, *Peace Time: Cease-Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Joshua S. Goldstein, *Winning the War on War: The Decline of Armed Conflict Worldwide* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

14. See Robert L. Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Leading-Power Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 1-14.

state's rights, self-determination, and local rule, power is decentralizing. Formerly about fusion, now nationalism focuses on fission, which theories of the past are ill equipped for.

Also, terrorism is in vogue as never before. Though terrorism has a long history, filled with anarchists, separatists, and socialists, among others, only recently have scholars placed such a high premium on the subject. While terrorists were previously viewed as pawns, there now exists a rich literature dedicated to analyzing non-state actors in their own right and at the expense of traditional issues of IR theory. Whether this is a fad or a movement remains to be seen.

Still, though much of the past is passed, in certain ways the world looks more like it did a century ago than any time since. With nearly identical tools for the maintenance of peace, the world faces the same challenges of advancing economic integration, retreating political integration, great power transitions, troublesome separatists, extremist ideologies, heady technological growth, and comparable military tactics. With the outbreak of World War II, World War I looked worse than futile. But the prosperous world we inherited was in part a product of the lessons of World War I, and the goal of many who fought in it. The peaceful present vindicates those who offered themselves to the pyre, but the conflagrations gone by caution against triumphalism.

