

**The 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War Two
'From Tragic History to a Brighter Future'**

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I would like to complement the two preceding presentations by offering some brief reflections on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II on three levels: personal, national and international or global.

As both previous speakers highlighted, the war triggered by Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 was a devastating watershed in C20th history that affected hundreds of millions of people. We must not forget those personal stories. The war's impact reverberates to this day in family histories around the world, including my own. Both my parents had their lives turned upside down because of the war.

As a 19-year old living in Warsaw, my father's life was changed from the moment Hitler's forces crossed the Polish border on 1 September 1939. I told his war story and spoke about how he fought in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 a few weeks ago at a presentation commemorating the 75th anniversary of that tragic event, alongside Ambassador Gniatkowski. For that reason, I will not repeat his story. Suffice to say, his wartime experience is representative of that of so many of his fellow Poles, but he was among those fortunate enough not only to survive the war but also to avoid living under communist repression. He came to New Zealand as a displaced person in 1950 and met my mother in Wellington, with German as their first common language of communication.

My mother's life too was transformed by war after Mussolini's Italy joined the Axis side in 1940. She lived in a part of north-eastern Italy that would become Yugoslavia after the war. Following Italy's surrender in 1943, my mother and grandmother risked their lives to hide an Italian officer from the Germans. Her cousin was killed by Germans after fighting as a partisan. She then had to move from her hometown of Pola, which was a naval base and was heavily bombed. When New Zealand forces liberated the city of Trieste in May 1945 at the same time as Tito's Yugoslav partisans, my mother was living only a few kilometres away in Yugoslav-controlled Capodistria (now Koper in Slovenia).

The subsequent territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia meant that, from 1947, she spent four years living in a converted grain silo in Trieste as part of the ‘Esodo’ of some two hundred thousand Italian-speaking people from the Istrian Peninsula in the late 1940s—outside Italy, one of the least remembered of the many human displacements that followed wars in the twentieth century. Eventually, in December 1951, my mother and half-brother arrived in Wellington as displaced persons to make a new life in New Zealand.

The war redirected the destinies of my parents in ways they would never have anticipated when growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. The lives of millions of others around the world were similarly disrupted (or prematurely cut short). Befitting the war’s impact on their lives, my father and mother respectively passed away on the fiftieth and seventieth anniversaries of Victory in Europe Day.

Second, let me turn to the national level. Ambassador Gniatkowski has highlighted the war’s impact for one nation, Poland, and I would like to highlight it for another, New Zealand, our own country.

The Second World War was New Zealand’s most significant international military experience. It was the only conflict in which the country faced a potentially realistic threat of invasion—from Japan. Even if spared invasion, New Zealand could simply not have thrived in the kind of world order likely to have emerged from anything less than total Allied victory over the Axis powers. Not surprisingly, the Second World War called forth the greatest concerted mobilisation of national resources in New Zealand’s history.

Ironically, some have suggested that this unprecedented national response was a kind of ‘colonial reflex’—an ingrained habit of willingly fighting ‘other people’s wars’, especially Britain’s. In part, this may be due to the resonance in popular memory of the famous phrase uttered by Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage in a radio broadcast on 5 September 1939 in which he said: ‘Both with gratitude for the past, and with confidence in the future we range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go, where she stands, we stand.’

Ever since, some have seized on those words to characterise New Zealand’s participation in the Second World War as uncritical acquiescence to British direction. Exponents of this viewpoint have also highlighted an unfavourable contrast with Australia, arguing that wartime leaders in

Canberra were more vigorous in pursuing their country's national interests than policy-makers in Wellington.

New Zealand certainly entered the war in 1939 to support Britain. But that is not the full story and it was not simply an instinctive manifestation of imperial loyalty. Rather, it was based on keen appreciation of New Zealand's own national interests and of the kind of world order its leaders and people supported.

The decision to enter the war reflected the tangible economic, political, and security interests which linked New Zealand to Britain and which meant that a British defeat would have been disastrous for New Zealand. While prominent in wartime rhetoric, the ties of blood and sentiment were balanced in practice by very real material considerations. Britain was New Zealand's most important trading partner and source of investment capital. It was also the sole possible guarantor of the nation's security—especially in 1939 when no other great power was pledged to defend New Zealand from external threats and when the United States was still neutral. In diplomatic terms too, almost all New Zealand's international political dealings were mediated through the framework of the British Empire and Commonwealth.

The decision to enter the war also reflected an adherence to certain principles. Since taking office in 1935, Savage's Labour government had been critical of the international community's failure to stem the rising tide of aggression in Europe and Asia. Those criticisms had been at the forefront of his government's assertion of a more distinctively New Zealand voice in foreign policy matters. For New Zealand not to have supported Britain in 1939 would have meant renouncing the government's own independently conceived commitment to a more just international order.

Just as New Zealand's entry into the war was not simply a pro-British gesture, so too its 'grand strategy' should not be mistaken as one. Policy-makers in Wellington based their wartime strategy on the recognition that, as a small state dependent on more powerful allies, what mattered most to New Zealand was how it could help secure victory for the Allied cause in the principal theatres of battle. That is why the decision was eventually made in 1943, after lengthy deliberation and soul-searching debate, to retain the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (the 'Div') in the Mediterranean theatre, where the hard-won battle experience of its soldiers might best be utilised. Though based on a different approach to Australia's, this strategy was not necessarily any less 'independent' or heedless of national interests.

New Zealanders who lived through those years can reflect with pride on the role which their country played during the Second World War. Within the limits of its resources and power, New Zealand ably defended both its national interests and its ideals as a small democracy in the South-west Pacific. Eighty years after the outbreak of that conflict, it remains important not to misunderstand why the New Zealand government acted as it did in 1939 and why the New Zealand people devoted themselves so vigorously to the ensuing struggle.

Finally, let me add a few words about the international or global dimension—something that has much resonance for our own times. When war was triggered by Hitler's forces crossing the Polish border on 1 September, it represented a cataclysmic failure of the interwar international political order. It was the last time in living memory that we witnessed such a breakdown, but it highlights what a huge price is to be paid when a rules-based order disintegrates and when "power politics pure and simple" prevail.

The Second World War was the bloodiest in human history. It exposed the world to the horrors of 'total war' on a scale never experienced before or since, resulted in over fifty million deaths and ushered in the nuclear age. Those grim legacies, however, are not the only reasons why the Second World War probably merits the title of "The Greatest War" of all time. It also involved a titanic clash of competing ideologies and visions of world order. As one leading scholar of the war aptly put it: 'This was, in fact, a struggle not only for control of territory and resources but about who would live and control the resources of the globe and which peoples would vanish entirely because they were believed inferior or undesirable by the victors.' But for the triumph of the Allies, the world would have been a bleaker and more dangerous place, even allowing for the four and a half decades of the Cold War which followed in the wake of that conflict. In that sense, the Second World War can also justifiably be remembered as the 'Good War'—a view reinforced by the subsequent acceptance with relief of the war's outcome by most of the peoples of the defeated Axis powers.

Another reason for thinking of it as the 'good war' relates to what followed after 1945 in terms of building a new edifice of international order based on institutions of global governance like the United Nations, on international agreements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on regional bodies like the European Union and NATO, and of organisations for economic management like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade

Organisation. As we know, it has not been a perfect order, but it is a positive legacy of World War II that represents the lessons drawn by the international community in that wake of that nightmare. Above all, we must cherish the Long Peace we have enjoyed since 1945 with respect to the effective absence of great power conflict—another legacy of World War II.

Today, we face new challenges to a rules-based international order, but there have been others over the past eight decades. We should be comforted that none of those challenges are comparable to those that were unleashed in September 1939. We also have the benefit in hindsight of the history of war and peace to guide us in responding to those challenges. And we should always bear in mind the dark memory of World War II to remind us of what happens when a rules-based international order breaks down irretrievably. We always need to be vigilant that the journey humanity has traversed since 1939 from tragic history to a brighter future is not reversed.

Ambassador Gniatkowski and Associate Professor Lichtner both eloquently stressed the importance for all humanity to remember those who perished in the struggle to ensure that the world to be built on the ashes of war was indeed ‘good’. I would like to end by returning to the human level and to cite the simple words on an inscription memorialising some Allied soldiers who died in one of the far-flung battlefields of that greatest war. The words speak universally for the very personal sacrifices their generation made for all those of us who followed and which we must not squander:

When you go home
Tell them of us, and say:
For your tomorrow,
We gave our today.