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The Importance of National Ethos in Military Victories

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Abstract: When nations are violently threatened, the choices that they make in order to cope with the challenge of war reflect different alternative possible reactions. They may choose to fiercely fight their battles; they may prefer to surrender, and sometimes the options lay in-between. One puzzle is, therefore, what makes nations fight, and more importantly—what causes them eventually to win or to lose the war. In search for an answer, this study inquires through secondary sources three historical case studies from World War II: Britain, France and Germany, and reviews how each of these major European powers acted throughout the war. After each historical description, the study examines the part that national ethos played in the manner in which each state handled war in moments of crisis. The national ethos of a people is the creed formed from the shared values and traditions through which the nation views its past, present and future; it is the integrating element that defines a nation's identity and bonds it into a coherent social group. The study reveals how national ethos is intertwined with another phenomenon of social psychology that turns it into a crucial factor in the management of international campaigns: war enthusiasm. Since national ethos is so crucial for the results of the war that a country might lead in order to survive or prosper, it is imperative for decision makers to bear in mind that it is also subject to a process of shaping and reshaping, as the Soviets have proved in relation to their Russian national ethos during World War II. A word of caution, however, is noteworthy: a wide historical perspective shows that even though the right kind of national ethos is essential for winning a war it is far from being enough. Hence national ethos proves, at the end of the day, to be a necessary condition for military victory but certainly not a sufficient one.

Keywords: national ethos; social psychology; political psychology; war enthusiasm

1. The Puzzle

On 10 May 1940, the *Wehrmacht* invaded Luxemburg, Holland and Belgium. Belgian resistance relied to a great extent on Fort Eben Emael. This fortress was located on a large hill on the Belgian-Dutch border and comprised an ensemble of turrets and casemates, equipped with numerous heavy guns and surrounded by deep ditches and minefields. The inside of the fortress contained tunnels running beneath it, connecting each turret to the command center and to the ammunition stores. Reinforced concrete made the whole construction practically bomb proof, and an advanced ventilation system enabled over 1200 troops to be fully protected inside this huge underground armored caserne for long periods of time. This amazing construction of Fort Eben Emael was the dead bolt on the gates to the country.

Five hours before the German attack the Belgian high command issued a war alert, but in Fort Eben Emael no preparations were made. Key positions at the fortress were still abandoned when the assault began and the proper ammunition had not been distributed. The German assault was executed by 85 soldiers landing on the roof of the fortress airborne by gliders; using flamethrowers, it took them no more than 30 min to disable the fort's artillery and observation posts. With no ammunition at hand, the Belgian anti-aircraft defenses were neutralized. The Belgian military orders had no plan for a battle

against an attacking force that would land without warning. Almost as soon as the Germans arrived, the bunkers of the fortress turned into a trap where the Belgian garrison, with a ten-to-one numerical superiority, was practically waiting for an opportunity to surrender.

Another German attacking force landed near the three bridges over the Albert Canal, destroyed a number of pillboxes and defeated the Belgian forces that had been on guard. The bridges could be destroyed with demolition charges set into their structures, triggered by a firing mechanism situated in close anti-tank bunkers; but caught by surprise none of the Belgian soldiers managed to blow up the bridges. Thus, the main entrance to Belgium lay open to the invaders in the course of several hours.

The Belgian campaign soon proved to be a constant fall from one defensive line to another, their army failing to hold on to any of its lines. Once the *Wehrmacht* broke through the defensive lines, the *Panzer*s forced through and the Belgian infantry could either retreat or risk encirclement. When war broke out, the Belgian army counted some 650,000 soldiers; at the time of surrender its casualties mounted to no more than 6500 dead; 99 percent of the fighting forces, not even counting civilians who could serve as reserves soldiers, were safe and sound [1–5].

Why was state like Belgium, the victim of German atrocities just two decades earlier, was unwilling to properly defend itself? Why is it that an army of hundreds of soldiers practically surrendered? What is the explanation for a nation's decision to give up its assets and chose submission, where rape, robbery, torture and humiliation are expected, upon struggle? What, conversely, drove other nations in similar circumstances to resist, at times—against all odds, and to struggle? What is it that urges nations to fight their way to survival and victory? A partial answer, suggested in this paper, lies in the field of national ethos.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Ethos is widely defined as the configuration of central societal beliefs that provide a particular orientation to a society. It combines dominant societal beliefs into a particular structure, and forms conditions necessary for social systems to function, acting as lenses through which each member comprehends the spirit of his social group. Thus, the ethos of a nation holds in fact one of the most important keys for a people's ability to unite into a cohesive society [6–9].

The use of ethos in political science goes back to the German romanticism of the late eighteenth century with philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder imprinting the term of *Zeitgeist*, which translates into “the spirit of the age”. Inspired by philosopher Friedrich Hegel's concept of mind and moral fiber, Herder spoke of the cultural, ethical and political climate in which a nation evolves and crystallizes [10]. These ideas project a strong association between the ethos and the representations of a far history that the nation claims for. The features of a community, as some scholars claim, have originated in the historical stages when the mental maps of the people, their prevailing culture, norms and ideas had been cultivated [11]. This attitude corresponds also with the writings of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, counted to have been the first to use the concept of collective memory. Leaning on the ideas of philosopher Henri Bergson, who had distinguished between a memory of a specific event and a memory of enduring attitudes, and on the socio-cultural accounts of sociologist Emile Durkheim who had indicated the manners in which Australian Aborigines had preserved the sacred values and rituals in their communities, Halbwachs spoke of a group memory that was shared by its members, passed on, and constructed by the social group. Rejecting Freudian and other purely psychological approaches, Halbwachs claimed that it was impossible for an individual to remember in any coherent and persistent fashion outside his group contexts; memories were not preserved in one's brain or in one's mind, they were rather external recollections controlled and constructed by the group. According to Halbwachs and other advocates of collective memory who have followed him, such as historians Marc Bloch and Aby Warburg, a social group's common recollection is a contested ideological terrain, where different actors try to establish their particular interpretation of the past as the only manner in which their particular group should comprehend its history. Society's collective memory is an ongoing

process that unites the group under the ideological perceptions and under the common ethics that are derived from its told and retold history [11–14].

Brooding over a century of bloodshed, late twentieth century scholars have added critical insights to the comprehension of collective memory, particularly in its national contexts. Statist ideologies, some of them claim, involve a manipulation of space and time in order to legitimate a monopoly on administrative control. National history, according to this attitude, is no more than false unity designed through an elite's conquest of historical awareness. These scholars also point out how national states all over the world exploit professional historical research and shift their peoples' center of collective memory from the temple and its priests to the university and its professors, from a religious set of myths to a political one relying on a subjective interpretation of history at best [15–17].

Whether judging the phenomenon as a positive one or as a destructive factor of our society, it seems that decades after Halbwachs, scholars have examined and reexamined his terminology, reaching once and again the same concept. The basic understandings are that a social memory shapes images of the past and draws, by doing so, the lines of political cultural profiles [18,19].

In its national context, the idea of a collective memory resides deep in international studies theorist Benedict Anderson's comprehension of the nation as an imagined community. The national identity, according to Anderson, has a symbolic and constructed nature, and by utilizing the communicative media it is capable of reaching dispersed populations [20]. The collective identity of a nation as a unique combination of a public that shares mutual values and beliefs lies in its common narratives, that is—its constructed collective memory, and in the united role that its members believe that fate had destined for them in this world. This is the national ethos, holding the foundations of the collective identity through a sense of a certain duty that the nation is bound to fulfill and through a set of common goals that the people as a united entity have been intended to achieve [21,22].

The notion of national ethos is intertwined with another phenomenon that is worthwhile mentioning particularly in the context of war: *war enthusiasm*. The prevailing scholarly concept views war enthusiasm as the reflection of a people's will to sustain any struggle. According to this observation, it is not the physical loss and destruction that determines a nation's decision to continue a struggle or to surrender, but simply its spiritual willpower. As long as a government and its citizens are motivated to continue, the struggle will not cease [23]. War enthusiasm was recorded, for example, when in 1915, after the breakout of World War I, over one million men had enlisted in the British army. This was a recruiting boom, at a rate that history had never known before, and it reveals an enthusiasm that possessed all the layers of the British society [24,25].

The story of the British public is certainly not an exceptional one; other European nations too seem to have greeted the coming Great War with unbounded energy and passionate fervor, lending this chapter in history the name *August days*, referring to the particular month when war broke out. War enthusiasm was everywhere, inside and even outside the continent, epidemically embracing the German people [26], the French [27], the Irish [28], the Welsh [29], and even the Australians—so far away from Europe [30].

The mirror-image of war enthusiasm is a phenomenon called *war weariness*, analyzed as a public tendency to avoid any violent international conflict. It is often asserted that the harder the war experience is the higher the chances are that both the decision makers, as well as their followers, will abhor any interstate conflict [31–33]. Yet, although it makes sense to connect war weariness with the experience of defeat, in defeated countries the desire for revenge might overcome any war fatigue, and might even lead rather to mounting war enthusiasm [34,35].

Indeed, when the case of Belgium is analyzed, one can see the cracks in the country's national ethos. The Kingdom of Belgium was established in 1830 as a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy, and in the course of several decades became home to two linguistic and cultural groups, the Dutch speakers in the region of Flanders in the northern part of the country and the French speakers in the southern region of Wallonia. This linguistic diversity has turned Belgium into a bilingual country, and formed a background for tensions between Flemish and Walloons. The Flemish problem, as it was

referred to, reached some of its heights during the interwar years, and in fact became a fundamental issue in Belgian politics.

For the Flemings, French was a foreign language; most of them did not even understand the language. Yet Flemish economy was dependent on the financial French speaking center of Brussels. In addition to that, the population of Flanders was greater than that of the Walloon provinces and was growing in a greater rate, so they had reason to demand that the country belonged to them, culturally, on an equal base. This tension, of course, was also fueled by the fact that the Flemish provinces, though rapidly industrialized and urbanized, originally experienced an economic backwardness in comparison to the districts of Wallonia. The Flemish feelings of discrimination and estrangement went as far as accusing the Belgian government of subordinating its foreign policy to the French interests, of involving Belgium in a war with Germany in which the Flemish provinces in particular would be bound to pay the bloody price of victimhood. Accordingly, productive military and strategic cooperation between Belgium and France was detained because closeness to France would ignite the negative response of the Flemings who would immediately suspect that the Walloons were trying to culturally push them aside once again.

For the Walloons, on the other hand, the French language associated the country with the universal civilization of Western Europe. Any demand for Flemish autonomy was considered no less than treason; hundreds of Flemish activists were imprisoned, often without trial, and thousands of them lost their jobs in the civil service. Several Flemish activists had even been sentenced to death, though none of them have ever been executed. Hence the meaning of the linguistic-cultural cleavage had gone far beyond an argument between two parts of the nation and, essentially, eliminated any ability of the country to act according to its best interests [36–38].

Additionally, domestic political crises have become during the 1930s almost an integral part of Belgian politics. The depression had sapped both the economy and the people's confidence in state institutes. With serious divisions along personal, ideological, and linguistic-cultural lines, coalition cabinets came and went rapidly [36,37]. One major figure that could have filled the leadership gap was King Albert I who had the ability to unite all the Belgians, from Flanders to Wallonia; Catholics and Socialists and Liberals [39]. Alas King Albert was suddenly killed in a mountaineering accident in 1933, and Belgium was at once deprived of the only figure that could unite all its social fractions. Too young and inexperienced, his son, Leopold III, had never had his father's outstanding charisma [5,36,40].

With no Belgian motivation to enlist, to serve in the army or to make the significant necessary investments of any of the country's assets for the sake of its military affairs during the 1930s, with no Belgian will to fight, it took the *Wehrmacht* barely three weeks to reach an unconditional surrender of the Kingdom that ceased to exist until the end of World War II.

3. Methodology

In comparative social studies, when systems constitute the original level of analysis and within-system variations are explained in terms of systemic aspects such as the national ethos, a "most similar systems" research design proves to be the best strategy. The basic assumption of this methodological attitude is that systems as similar as possible with respect to as many features as possible constitute the optimal samples for comparative inquiry [41]. In search for parallel case studies, geographic and timing considerations have led this research to focus on the scenery of World War II. Falling within the general methodological definition of a small-N study [42], this project examined three case studies of dominant countries who had shaped Europe's politics for centuries: (1) the United Kingdom that overcame the Battle of Britain in 1940 and guaranteed its status as a major geopolitical actor for the rest of the war; (2) the French Third Republic with its defeat in 1940; (3) the Third Reich that ruled Europe until it finally ceased to exist in 1945.

These cases differ in their history, geopolitics, culture and numerous political psychological factors, making each of them an entirely unique one, totally incomparable with any other case. Yet these nations have lived through the same regional geopolitical environment of Europe of the first half of

the twentieth century; located in the same continent, exposed to the same threats and opportunities, these different countries have been situated, in a way, in a historic laboratory, allowing us to observe how in similar settings different variations of national ethos can act.

However, a word of caution: This paper analyzes conventional warfare, conducted mainly by the use of battlefield tactics between states in open confrontation. In its classic form, the aim of conventional warfare is to force capitulation and its logic resides within the nineteenth century paradigm shaped by Carl von Clausewitz [43]. The role of national ethos and its contribution to victory might be different in modern times, when asymmetric warfare is fought between states with their regular armies of professional forces, and an insurgency or resistance movement. In this sense World War II differs, for example, from the modern war in the Middle East between Assad's Syria and ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which in practice is a non-state player—a Salafi jihadist fundamentalist organization [44].

4. Findings from the Case Study of United Kingdom

Starting in 10 July 1940 the Germans launched an air campaign with the objective of gaining air superiority over the RAF (Royal Air Force) so that a German amphibious and airborne invasion could succeed.

According to some of the historians, when the *Luftwaffe* commenced its aerial assaults, the attacking force counted more crewmen than their counterparts, with far more experience than any of their rivals; these were qualified pilots, some of them Spanish Civil War veterans and all of them intensively trained in fighter-versus-fighter aerial combat tactics. The RAF, on the other hand, was outnumbered and struck with the permanent loss of hundreds pilots during the Battle of France only a month earlier. As the fighting continued, finding sufficient numbers of fully trained fighter pilots became acute. New pilots stood very little chances to survive their first five sorties: they were inexperienced in comparison to the *Luftwaffe* pilots that they were about to encounter and lacked enough preparation; on top of this, in most cases being new in the squadron meant that they would get the most damaged and least reliable craft. New pilots would also fulfill the role of a tail gunner—a crewman whose duty it was to operate a machine gun emplaced on the tail end of the aircraft; this was a vulnerable position that lowered even more the chances of fresh pilots to survive.

Casualties for the RAF were severe. Just from 26 August 1940 to 6 September 1940, in the course of 10 days, 103 British pilots were either killed or missing and 128 were wounded. These somewhat dry statistics mean that the British suffered a weekly total wastage of over 10 percent of their aerial fighting force with no proper immediate replacement. In addition, aircraft were lost: 295 fighters had been totally destroyed in the above acknowledged period of time and 171 badly damaged, yet the output of new and repaired Spitfires and Hurricanes, the major planes in service, did not exceed 270 aircraft. Some strictly numerical accounts lead to the conclusion that the RAF was losing the battle [45,46].

Modern lethal duels were performed in the sky high above, but the purpose of the *Luftwaffe* was to launch the *Blitz*—a continual strategic bombing of England's population. The capital of London was air raided for 76 consecutive nights and so were other towns and cities across the island. In London alone over 1 million houses were destroyed; all over Britain more than 40,000 civilians were killed, half of them in London. Ports and industrial centers were major targets for German bombers, though one of the leading objectives of the aerial assault was to crush British willingness to continue the struggle against the Third Reich.

On the whole, the reaction of the British people to the aerial bombardment of cities, and of London in particular, has justified what some historians refer to as the myth of the *Blitz*-spirit. The popular view is that the British people exhibited great fortitude and moral integrity, as well as a considerable amount of cheerfulness and stoic endurance in spite of the grave situation.

Despite the massive bombardments that have left damage and death on a daily basis, people in England insisted on continuing their routine of work and normal life. Accumulating testimonies prove that in most cases either during the raid or in its aftermath there was no sign of panic. The ground

services that had the duty of assisting the population were comprised mainly of wartime volunteers who were now experiencing the hazards of air raids for the first time; though being no more than amateurs in their field of responsibility, numerous testimonies reveal how they dealt with harrowing and disturbing scenes with calm professionalism, thus spreading confidence and reassurance among the general populace.

Surely, there were also cases of evacuees, who would leave the city shortly following large attacks; most, however, used to return a week or two later. Leaving the place in search of safe vicinity was a reaction of middle class city inhabitants who could afford to send their children out of the city at short notice and then return once danger seemed to have passed. This reaction, in terms of war enthusiasm in the precise context of a nation under aerial attack, may represent a negative, although sensible, reaction to severe incidents, however—it does not represent the vast majority of Englishmen and Englishwomen, particularly Londoners, who demonstrated their resoluteness to stick to as normal life as possible even in face of the daily horrors that they were suffering [47–49].

An indication for war enthusiasm can also be drawn from the reaction of Britons to calls for arms. On 14 May 1940 Anthony Eden, Secretary for War, appealed men aged 17 to 65 who were not engaged in military service to join local defense volunteer forces, later assembled and titled the Home Guard. 2 months later recruitment had to be suspended because over 1,300,000 men had enrolled. Considering that by then manpower was already fairly much utilized either for industry or for air raid precaution services, this readiness of so many Britons to enlist and serve voluntarily as part-time soldiers was remarkable.

The willingness of hard-working men to endure the frequent nightly guard duties waiting for the day when a German assault might take place is certainly no minor thing. Similarly, work in the military factories, specifically in the aerial industry, became highly productive, far beyond any increase of payments to the workers. Starting on summer 1940 the British passionately attached themselves to the war, with a united government and a people who as one nation made victory their slogan [47–52].

The British national ethos is one of a maritime island. It has been based on three intertwined themes that developed equivalently throughout the centuries: (1) the island as a universal exemplar of civilization; (2) the besieged island; (3) the navy as its protector.

The first theme of England as a cultural source for world hegemony has to do with the history of British conquest and power: though relatively small in terms of land and size of its people, the British Empire dominated tremendously larger units of territory and population. At its height Britain proudly governed over an empire 125 times the size of the English island. The island, then, was seen as the heart and soul of free trade, world commerce and a libertarian fervor wishing to thrive and expand. This is the theme implanted in the words of the Scottish playwright James Thomson whose poem of the 1740s was at times almost a second British national hymn:

The nations, not so blest as thee, must, in their turns, to tyrants fall; while thou shalt flourish
great and free, the dread and envy of them all. Rule, Britannia! Rule the waves: Britons
never will be slaves ([53], p. 122).

The second theme, the one of a besieged nation, though tightly entangled with the first, is connected with the island mentality, sometimes conceiving Britons as an island-race, a notion that forms the title of Winston Churchill's English history book. The perception of the British unique character born on the island with the deriving good virtues developed a popular iconography of the heroic British Tar. Gilbert and Sullivan, late Victorian era musicians, immortalized the stereotype of the English ideal sailor in their 1878 Operetta *H.M.S Pinafore* that immediately became one of their greatest successes. They commemorated the folkloric legendary character of the English simple sailor who would always maintain a personal freedom and a democratic approach, ready to defend those values at any point in time [54].

The legacy of the traditional simple Jack Tar was strongly coupled with the third theme of British ethos, the popular gratification of the navy. Englishness has been to a large extent connected with a

consciousness of a seafaring community, with the Royal Navy guarding the coasts of the island, alert and ready to meet the danger posed variously by its historic maritime enemies—Spain, France, and Holland. It is of no surprise, then, that military marine English bravery is inscribed deep within British art and can be vividly noticed in the urban landscape, particularly in the public monuments all over London. However, in spite of the long history of cultural glorifying of the Royal Navy as almost the life insurance of the United Kingdom, in pre-World War II Britain the air power cult was very quickly replacing the naval one; the RAF was soon to become the modern substitute for the warship fleets of sixteenth century victorious Admiral Francis Drake or early nineteenth century naval hero Horatio Nelson [55–58].

Thus, one can sum up that in the history of the British people the experience of 1940 was not entirely a new one. The national English narrative is set with other occurrences throughout the ages when the Britons had been left to fight alone for their freedom as a people and for the public law of Europe. Their stubbornness in such crises of the past had made them once and again the constant rallying center of new coalitions [51]. Winston Churchill used all three themes of the English national ethos throughout his numerous speeches; in fact it would not be totally wrong to say that his whole personal life span represented those themes and his orations only verbalized them and turned them into empowering phrases. The inspiration that stemmed from Churchill's inspiring words was not only a result of his mastery of the language or the winning logic of his personal thoughts; rather, he expressed the deep roots of a long developed national British ethos. His successful mobilization of Britons into their years-long struggle against the Third Reich was due to the deep historical notion of the British ethos.

5. Findings from the Case Study of the French Third Republic

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded Belgium and the Netherlands. The *Wehrmacht* circumvented the Maginot Line in a flanking movement through the thickly wooded Ardennes region, and in the course of three weeks managed to push the English literally into the sea, and to entirely decimate the ranks of the French army.

One of the most decisive battles, certainly one that illuminates the way the whole French campaign had been handled, was the so-called Battle of Sedan, dating 12 May 1940. Sedan was a strategic key point on the east bank of the Meuse River; controlling it would enable the Germans to cross its bridges and to roll across the totally undefended French countryside, then advance straight to the English Channel. In spite of its strategic crucial importance, Sedan was captured with practically no resistance at all. During the next two or three days the French forces manning the west bank of the Meuse failed to mount any coherent defense.

The *Luftwaffe's* bombardment reduced French morale until the French army was psychologically broken down. All the bridges were captured allowing the *Wehrmacht* to pour freely across the river and to break into the strategic depths leading to the English Channel without any further meaningful opposition. By 10 June 1940, 100,000 French soldiers were dead and the rest of the French army had been split up into small groups, none of them larger than a battalion, all of them lacking initial supplies and communications. The victory at Sedan enabled the *Wehrmacht* to encircle both the French strongest army and the British forces in France. In the following battles the remaining French army was destroyed and the British units had to evacuate the continent.

Perhaps a clear illustration of the way the French armies were mauled and rendered themselves impotent emerges from the account of one of Rommel's attacks. The French Fifth Motorized Infantry Division was sent to block his Panzer Division, but the Germans were advancing unexpectedly fast, and Rommel surprised the French vehicles while they were refueling. The Germans were able to fire directly into the neatly lined French vehicles and overrun their position completely. The French unit had disintegrated into a wave of refugees; they had been overrun literally in their sleep. In about 48 h, Rommel had managed to take more than 10,000 prisoners and suffered only 36 losses [59].

A thorough overview of the balance of forces between the *Wehrmacht* that stormed to the west and the French defense forces reveals that German victory may not necessarily have been a predetermined fate. If all the allied forces are taken into account, the French army of 114 divisions was strengthened by an additional 22 Belgian divisions, 10 Dutch divisions, 11 British divisions, and 10 more divisions of fortress troops manning the Maginot Line. All in all this huge force of 167 divisions was facing Hitler's 136 divisions dedicated for the conquest of France. Although taken by surprise, the allied forces were all but outnumbered [60].

The German tanks, the major vehicle of the *Blitzkrieg*, had been lighter than those of their French rivals and are considered to have been somewhat inferior; on top of this, with no more than 2445 tanks the Germans had been outnumbered by 3383 French tanks. The tactics of forming an iron spearhead that cut the allies' divisions and reduced their quantitative advantages had proved efficient; yet had the French been determined to fight, they would have been able to cut the German lines and isolate the *Wehrmacht's* motorized forces from the slowly advancing infantry and more importantly—from its crucial logistic facilities [61].

As the German advance accelerated, the French government fled to Bordeaux, where the fate of the Third Republic, in fact—the fate of France, was to be decided upon. By 10 June 1940 the information that the ministers got from the army was that the *Wehrmacht's* advance was inexorable and impossible to halt. However, capitulation had not been the only possible option. It had become impossible to defend Paris, but France still had its fleet and its empire intact. Just like Leon Gambetta who had left besieged Paris in a hot air balloon at the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War in order to organize an army from the outside, so could the leadership of the Third Republic carry on the struggle.

Indeed, Winston Churchill had spoken about making a stand in Brittany, and Charles de Gaulle, then the most junior of all the brigadier generals and a newly appointed member of the French war cabinet, has spoken of forming a base in Algiers. Yet when on 16 June 1940, Churchill, completely backed by his cabinet, suggested an Anglo-French union, the offer was rejected by the French government. Marshall Weygand, the supreme commander of the French army had tapped the Prime Minister Paul Reynaud's telephone lines and then contacted other ministers in a feverish campaign against the plan. Upon consulting with the ministers, Marshall Philippe Pétain, by then a new member of the war cabinet, called the idea of a union "fusion with a corpse", referring the term to Britain, and French Minister Jean Ybarnegaray argued that it would be better for France to become a Nazi province than a British dominion ([62], p. 187; [63], p. 298).

It is evident, then, that the high command of the French army had sunk into defeatism and had become determined to capitulate. Having lost any inspiration, an armistice had become the only option they could think about [64,65]. The defeatism that characterized the French political and military leadership crossed, as mentioned before, all the French social strata as well as the rank and file of the army. A few days after having left conquered France, Ralph Delhey Paine, head of the European staff of Life and Time magazines, reported to his journal's headquarters

[...] Troops are fed up with the people, the government and officers. People are fed up with troops, officers and the government. The government and officers are apparently looking after their own skins. [...] The officers failed their men and their country. We saw hundreds [of officers] among the refugees, evacuating their own wives and families. We noticed the mingling of refugees and defeated troops—soldiers with families, army trucks with civilians. Our definite impression was that there has been little hard fighting since the fall of Paris. We saw virtually no wounded at any time ([66], p. 2).

This testimony corresponds with many others, describing fleeing troops and regiments abandoning their posts in order to escape the battle, sometimes led by their commanders who had panicked. Some troops have dissolved without being attacked and others faded away at the mere threat of Germans. They would join the increasing numbers of refugees who have formed long columns that blocked the roads and disabled military supplies of food and petrol [64,67].

The peculiar behavior of a society capable of coping with its challenges yet choosing to give up when objective evidence points out that not necessarily all had been lost leads this study to adopt the rather more traditional attitude of historians, based on the concept of *la décadence* (the decadence), according to which the French defeat had resulted from lack of willpower among the French society and from the moral rot, weakness and cowardice of its leaders. Perhaps the first outstanding representative of this concept is historian Marc Bloch who as a *resistance* warrior was caught and tortured to death by the Nazis in 1944. Bloch had completed almost in real time his book *Strange Defeat*, depicting his point of view by the very title of the study that was published after his death, where he blamed the French social and political culture for the sudden total military defeat [68].

One solution, then, following *la décadence* point of view, for the mystery of why the Third Republic had collapsed, lies in the mental state of the French People as well as their leadership. However, the question of how a nation had practically handed itself to its enemies was not only a matter for historians to inquire. After the war the French Parliament instituted a Committee to investigate the causes of the defeat, but it was disbanded in 1951 with its work unfinished.

On 22 June 1940, in the very same railway carriage where at the aftermath of World War I the Germans have signed their surrender, France was forced to submit to the Third Reich and put an end to the Third French Republic. In a course of a month, one of the leading powers of Western Europe had been totally overrun; in no more than several weeks what had been considered as one of the free world's leading forces had totally collapsed and was bound to remain virtually dismantled for the rest of the war. Led by Philippe Petain, most of the country was turned into the vassal French State of Vichy, to eagerly collaborate with their German conquerors through the coming years until the liberation [64].

6. Findings from the Case Study of the Third Reich

On 1 September 1939 Hitler's Third Reich launched what would become the deadliest conflict in human history, with estimations exceeding 60 million fatalities all over the world. The new German empire of the Third Reich, heading a group of countries known as the Axis, managed to expand its conquests from France in the west to Poland in the east, directly or indirectly controlling southern Europe, the Balkans, and a large territory of Northern Africa. By spring 1941 Germany reached its peak of success, and Hitler's promise of a Reich of a thousand years seemed to be on its way to fulfillment. However, several events would totally change the course of history: Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's assault on the Soviet Union in 22 June 1941, would mark a turning point in the war, with the *Wehrmacht* suffering hundreds of thousands of casualties in the battle of Moscow that ended with a German retreat never to be recovered [69,70]. A second watershed line that marked the future results of this war was the United States' active involvement in full scale once Japan has attacked Pearl Harbor. It was the entrance of the American super power, with its large manpower reserves and its industrial capabilities, that totally switched the balance of forces in Europe. Thus, from 1942 onwards, though tied up with a war in the Far East, America was to become the unbeatable participant that would eventually determine the course of European history. By the end of 1943, even Hitler's closest and most loyal followers had finally realized that the war was turning into a nightmare, with Allied bombings over all the Reich's cities and the news of a defeat rumored in the German streets. The *Wehrmacht* was now shooting its last bolts, pulling the effort of a last major offensive and throwing its last reserves into warfare of strategic defense, whilst the Allies, in particular the American forces, were still at their best [60].

In the well-known D-Day of 6 June 1944 American and British forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, and several weeks later the Soviets launched their offensives in Byelorussia, Ukraine and Poland, completely destroying the German armies there. The pincer movement in which the Red Army was regaining its territorial losses and invading from the east whereas the Allies were pushing from the west was now in full motion, steadily pushing the *Wermacht* to a retreat in all fronts. By the end of 1944 the German command had admitted a total of almost 1.5 million casualties with over 100 divisions either destroyed or disbanded for use as replacements. Yet heavily influenced by the

National Socialist ideological preconceptions and consistent with their earlier actions throughout a decade since they had seized power, the Nazis continued to hope, plan, and prepare to reverse the course of the war. They would not cease to fight, denying the possibility of defeat and at times relying on wild inaccuracies until the very end of the war. Indeed, interviews of German prisoners of war that have taken place shortly after they had been captured revealed that despite the proved overwhelming superiority of their enemies the soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* stayed singularly steadfast throughout the war; their morale remained very high, and their belief in Hitler and in a secret plan that would eventually turn the tide again had not diminished even when they had witnessed the annihilation of all the German units around them. A stubborn rejection of any possible surrender had been the leading concept characterizing officers as well as plain soldiers across the whole German army [71–74].

Although combat efficiency is difficult to define and to assess, the German soldiers have portrayed excellent performance and they have proved effective and competent by any measure whether employed in attack or in defense, whether winning or losing the battle. They have been bold, persistent, and loyal to their cause. Yet finally the human attrition was bound to determine the outcomes of this war. In 1944 alone the casualties of the *Wehrmacht* counted nearly two million men killed, missing and wounded; this figure nearly equaled total army casualties from the start of the war until 1943. In fact, by the end of the war about 20 percent of the German male population of military age was either dead or injured. No nation and no military force can sustain such high levels of loss indefinitely, and the German final collapse had therefore been no more than an inevitable epilog [75,76].

The German willingness to fight, however, should be tested not in the years of victory and military success, but rather in times of hardships when the costs of war and the effects of its terrible losses could have had some severe demoralizing outcomes. Such were the circumstances of the German last attempt to block the advancing British forces in northern Italy from late 1944 to the beginning of 1945.

When all had been lost and the Allies were practically on their way into mainland Germany, the Gothic Line in northern Italy has become the scenery for the last grand battle. The *Gotenstellung* was an 80 kilometer long and 16 kilometer wide coast to coast line of fortifications extending from the Appenine Mountains to the west and running unbroken to the Adriatic Sea. The terrain was one of tall crests and peaks rising to over 2000 meters of height. The defenses included concrete gun pits and trenches, thousands of machine gun nests, hundreds of anti-tank gun positions, 120 kilometers of barbed wire and numerous anti-tank ditches.

By August 1944 the Italian front has become of secondary importance for the Allies, their major effort concentrated in the offensives through France. Therefore, they reduced their armies confronting the Gothic Line and left only eighteen divisions to challenge a German army exactly this size. When combating began it soon became virtually a door to door and hand to hand fighting, with scarcely a meaningful advance. For almost four months the Allied forces had led fierce battles, breaching the line temporarily from time to time, but no decisive breakthrough was achieved. The blood of dozens of thousands of dead soldiers from both sides brought no more than a stalemate.

When the autumn rains started, at the beginning of 1945, swollen rivers crossed the Allies' lines and the mud made any advance virtually impossible. Exhausted and immobilized, they reluctantly chose to wait for a change of weather. It was only during the 1945 Spring offensive, then, that with the enormous Anglo-American Allied Fifteenth Army Group of more than 1,300,000 soldiers the Allies finally managed to outflank the fortified line and overrun it [77].

The German people have literally fought to the last man. The Battle of Berlin, to take another example, was totally chanceless in the first place, yet fought stubbornly by the Germans. With the Reich's capital already massively encircled by the Red Army, started on 20 April 1945 and continued until 2 May 1945, forming one of the bloodiest battles in history. Inside the city, several thousands of German soldiers from mostly unorganized units had been reinforced by the *Volkssturm* units of elderly men who had been considered to be unfit for military service and by the *Hitlerjugend* boys, sometimes of no more than fourteen years old. The city was heavily shelled and for ten days its inexperienced defenders fought fiercely against the Soviet soldiers who were steadily advancing practically from

house to house. When the Soviets arrived at the Reichstag, they were severely attacked by hundreds of German soldiers who had been well stocked with food and ammunition, fortified in the basements and rooms of the abandoned parliament house, awaiting combat. Launching counter attacks on the Russian soldiers their fighting was eventually reduced to a hand to hand combat, until most of them have been either dead or badly wounded. Berlin finally surrendered only when it had been utterly devastated [78].

An examination of the national ethos in the German case reveals some deep historical roots. During the Eighteenth century, a cultural bond developed into a German doctrine of national mission—an ethos that long preceded the 1871 establishment of the Empire. In the absence of a unified German state the idea of a German nation migrated initially into the sphere of culture and the educated German classes advanced a national spirit based on the German language that by then was dominant in church and town bureaucracies, in courts, in academies and in theatres. The cultural distinction, spiritually stronger than any other European equivalent political distinction of nationality, was strengthened by a line of eighteenth century German intellectuals. For example, Johann Gottfried Herder, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Friedrich Schiller and others regarded German national literature and German national theatre as a substitute for the missing German political organizational framework of a nation. Thus, when eventually Otto von Bismarck established in 1871 the German Empire, combining the principle of a dynasty with the hegemony of Prussia, German nationalist forces had already established the cultural infrastructure laying stable foundations for the relatively new nation state [79–82].

In addition to the strong cultural foundations of the German nationality, historians point out how the Napoleonic wars of early nineteenth century stimulated a nationality that was born in the barracks. The military service forged, according to this historical interpretation, a closer relationship between the state and its subjects; it encouraged a militaristic culture that would bind German society in a manner that would last as late as the Twentieth century [83–85]. France's role as a binding enemy outlived the defeat of Napoleon and in 1840 the threat of war led to new German patriotic sentiments. It was during those days that a talented poet, Hoffmann von Fallersleben, wrote a song set to an old tune by Joseph Haydn, *Deutschland über alles*; the song would later become the German national anthem. Enmity with France, however, continued to ignite German patriotism and during the 1870s and 1880s Bismarck still tried to exploit the fear of French vengeance to stimulate an artificial national German unity [80].

The Nazi movement cunningly gathered its ideological anthologies, building what to the common people could seem to have been a concrete philosophical dogma. This German creed was created relying on the works of Joseph Arthur Gobineau about the historical appearance of the master race, drawing from the pan-Germanic and Wagner admirer Houston Stuart Chamberlain, learning nationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke, and adding to all these the relatively new Nazi anti-Semitism of Alfred Rosenberg. On top of these, with an extra philosophical and academic authority, Friedrich Nietzsche and his criticism of the modern thought was fostered by the Nazis as supporting their own decadence [86].

Nazism could establish profoundly the national ethos because it had all the properties of a pseudo-religion: a cult, rituals, incantations, priests, and a giant congregation. Traditional and religious yearly events with authentic ceremonies and ancient Teutonic themes revived and transformed into the Nazi ideological message [58]. Beyond the power of National Socialism to establish the national ethos, the German ethos of the 1930s cannot be disconnected from the phenomenon of the authoritarian personality referred to the German society. As obedience to the leader, so was loyalty to the Fatherland an expression of the authoritarian attitude, since in comparison to the Fatherland the individual's self-perception was one of greatest inferiority. Skillful manipulation of the leadership principle in connection with the appeal to loyalty to the homeland created an attitude that made death for the sake of the nation a glorious and heroic duty. Additionally, according to the authoritarian concept authority relationships among nations were viewed in terms of vertical power dimensions, just like among individuals. The superior nation was justified to rule over others, and the history of nations

was no more than their natural hierarchical alignment mainly by means of war [83,87–90]. In all, then, Germany had a strong national ethos, particularly highlighted by the country's Nazi leadership.

7. Conclusions

According to Carl von Clausewitz, war is an act of force intended to compel a nation's enemy to do its will. War is therefore a struggle for power, whether to impose one nation's desire on other social groups or to resist such impositions [43]. This struggle for power is an intrinsic element in the relations between states; hence the account of hostile campaigns has always been the crux of international politics. States seek advantages over other states in order to ensure national survival and provide a better life for the leading social forces of their countries; consequently, when these advantages can be adequately acquired through the practice of war—international violence is bound to take place. In future, therefore, violence will probably continue to form a significant means to settle disputes among nations. Even if we assume that reason and restraint prevail, even if we adopt the thought that generosity is to replace hatred and envy, all it takes is a single eccentric member of the community to violate the norms and violence finally emerges. Hence even the most optimistic pacifists can hardly deny that war does not belong only to human history, but to that extent or another it will remain an integral part of any future social life. It seems that the vitality of Sun Tzu's 2500-year old claim that war is crucial to the country because it is where the state takes a road to either survival or ruin will not fade away in any forthcoming international scenery [23,91].

It is for this reason that the question of who wins wars and the quest for the factors that lead to military victory are not merely there for the purpose of scientific curiosity. Rather, these are realistic issues that decision-makers ought to be aware of as part of their practice as leaders.

In order to detect the role of national ethos as a key factor, a comparative research was constructed, concentrating on three case studies of major political actors that were engaged in World War II. The case studies were: (1) the United Kingdom that overcame the Battle of Britain and eventually won the war; (2) the French Third Republic that was defeated; (3) the Third Reich that ruled Europe until totally conquered by its rivals.

The results indicate that the United Kingdom, one of the major winners of this war, was fuelled by an inspiring national ethos. The concept that their island is a universal exemplar of Western civilization, eternally besieged but protected by the Royal Navy enabled Britons to fight their enemies against all odds—up in the sky against the *Luftwaffe*, and down on the ground where ordinary people were willing to sacrifice whatever it took. The French, on the other hand, whose national ethos was one of *la décadence*—political corruption and civil loss of faith, did very little to fight for their homeland. The comparison between these two study cases leads to the conclusion that an inspiring national ethos that arouses war enthusiasm is what it takes for a nation to win its wars.

Joseph Stalin needed no sociological analyses in order to realize the power of national ethos. The German success to unite and mobilize people made him appreciate its potency. Historians who had been imprisoned for allegedly holding non-Marxist attitudes, were now released and sent immediately back to the academy, where they were ordered to glorify the distant Russian past. Indeed, the very morning after the Nazi invasion of 23 June 1941, the term “the Great Patriotic War” was stamped in an article in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*. The reference to the Patriotic War of 1812 was clear: once again a large army had invaded Russia, once again retreat and defeat seemed to have been the leading theme, but history has its ways and eventually the Russian people would prevail and the invaders would be annihilated. A 1941 war poster showed a portrait of Mikhail Kutuzov, the admired Russian general whose brilliant command enabled Napoleon to storm into Russia just to be beaten at Borodino, and then to be pushed all the way out of the country with his *Grande Armée* annihilated. Under Kutuzov's new portrait a quotation of Stalin read: “Let the valorous example of our great ancestors inspire you in this war” ([92], p. 134). In World War II Russia, a new recognition of a legendary national ethos had emerged, and the Soviet Union was in a process of rediscovering its Russian origins, re-interpreting past events, and reinventing the collective memory with fresh meanings and a spanking new glory.

School textbooks now quoted 19th century Russian intellectuals who viewed their country as having belonged neither to the West nor to the East. They chose to imagine Russia standing alone in the world, unique within humanity [92–94].

Hence on a practical level one can conclude, relying on the findings in this study and following Stalin's steps, that nourishing an inspiring national ethos is liable to enable leaders to rally their followers into struggle once national circumstances demanded. However, the example of the Third Reich puts things in a different light. The German ethos, deeply rooted in the Eighteenth century and cunningly developed by the Nazis, was indeed an inspiring one. It was an ethos that led the German people to sacrifice millions of their soldiers, to suffer destruction and devastation, yet never to cease fighting. Eventually, they lost the war fighting to the last man.

Criticizers of this analysis, including reviewers of this paper, claim that the defeat of 1918 shows how German national ethos did not always necessarily prove resilient. The German collective spirit had been embedded two hundred years before World War II, but in-between, the criticizers assert, the Germans surrendered and chose to quit fighting for their country at the end of World War I. This, to my interpretation, is a misunderstanding of the historical events that led to Germany's defeat. At the end of 1917 and beginning of 1918, in spite of the enormous numbers of never-ending casualties, German morale was at its best. When the great German spring offensive failed to break the British forces, and American forces were pouring into France at a rate of 10,000 new soldiers a day, the German leadership realized that the game was over for them. However, one has to bear in mind that The Germans suffered attrition more than any of their rivals did and were still willing to fight almost until the end of the war [95–97]. More importantly, Germany lost World War I but it was still in France when the war ended. This had a surprising future effect: instead of a chapter in history that provokes national ethos and stains the national narrative with an experience of defeat and humiliation, the Germans reframed history and blamed the civilians back home for betraying the army and surrendering. Instead of shame and disgrace, the collective memory shaped by the engineers of national ethos invented the Stab-in-the-Back legend, adding honor and pride to the German people as a fighting nation [98].

The German case study of World War II implies that even though the right kind of national ethos is essential for winning a war it is far from being enough. A wide historical perspective, then, shows that national ethos proves, in the final analysis, to be a necessary condition for military victory but certainly not a sufficient one.

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