

Geography at War

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I taught geography at the college level — I was constantly bombarded by questions about the usefulness of geography. It is hard to demonstrate. I gave my students reasons why geographic knowledge is valuable for everyone to know, for business, for general knowledge of the world, necessary for decision-making as citizens; but unlike language study, the immediate utility seemed to elude their understanding. Here is a concrete example of geographic knowledge used in war, not the obvious, of maps and plans, but of the vital importance of knowledge of the fundamental geography of the world and its nations.

Several years of appeasement had not satisfied Hitler. In September 1939 he invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war on Germany while Hitler and Stalin split Poland right down the middle, like a watermelon at a picnic. Several months later, in the spring of 1940, Germany took the rest of Europe. Hitler's armies swept through Belgium, crushed the French, and drove the English armies to the sea and back to England.

The planners of the U.S. military were not caught completely by surprise. At a planning conference held early in 1939, these men contemplated a possible war with Germany, Italy, and Japan. In such an instance, they decided, the best chance of victory for U.S. forces would be to fight in Europe first. Why?

Two years later, with Germany now in control of Europe, with Britain fighting for her life, a second conference was held in strictest secrecy. British

and American military planners had come together to discuss joint actions in case of America's entry into the war. The conclusion was even more definitive: if the U.S. entered the war, it would direct its principal effort against Germany. Once again, why?

At fifty years' distance, it seems hard to understand. After all, the European war did not directly involve any U.S. interests, while a war with Japan would directly threaten U.S. lives and property in Asia and the Pacific. Why Europe first? A little geographic knowledge makes the decision understandable.

Look at railroad maps from the era. Germany and western Europe are almost black from the myriad lines crisscrossing the region; Japan had only a few central lines. On time charts of the Industrial Revolution, only Great Britain has a longer time-line than Germany's. Maps of coal and iron ore deposits dot western Europe. Japan is natural-resource poor, dependent on imports of raw materials. Germany only lacks a few, notably petroleum, which it could obtain in eastern Europe (the Ploesti oilfields, for one). For a hundred years before the war, Germany had been one of the central economic, scientific, and industrial powerhouses of the world. Japan, during the same period, had been an isolated, tradition-bound agricultural society.

The human resources of Germany in terms of scientific and technologic potential were immense: it has had one of the most well-educated, skilled workforces in the world. Many of the most important discoveries in science and engineering had occurred in Germany, or had been the products of people educated in Germany.

The Atlantic in comparison to the Pacific is a mere puddle. The vast distances involved in a war with Japan were a barrier to Japanese actions against mainland America; whereas the Atlantic was no barrier at all to the Germans, rather an opportunity. They had demonstrated this to great effect in their submarine campaign against British shipping. Such a campaign could put coastal shipping along the east coast of the U.S.A. at great peril (just as such a campaign did do, after U.S. entry into the war). Most of America's population

and industry were in the eastern U.S. at that time, vulnerable to German action. Shipping routes to South America and access to the Panama Canal were also in jeopardy.

The last part of this explanation deals with potential allies and opportunities for the U.S. There were only two directly engaged with the enemy at the time: England and China. Aid could be given to England almost immediately. China was another matter. As the U.S. and allied forces discovered during the war, it was extremely difficult to supply China. Japan had control of China's Pacific coast, so all supplies had to be taken into China via "the back door" from India and Burma, across some very rough landscape. Further, China had no industrial base or major transport infrastructure (at least none not already in the hands of the Japanese). The Chinese are a very brave and valiant people, but the effort involved in mounting a major campaign based from China was almost insurmountable.

The same Atlantic Ocean that was an opportunity for the Germans was also an opportunity for America. If the North Atlantic could be made safe for transport ships, American industrial might could pour into Britain. Britain could become a stationary aircraft carrier for air operations against Germany; the island could be a gigantic staging area for troops. The geography of Great Britain and Europe worked to the advantage of the Americans and their British allies. The key was the North Atlantic. Even here the geography of the ocean played a role: British and Canadians (and a bit later their American allies) used Iceland as a base for their operations against the German submarine threat. The island was also used for long-range air patrols of the ocean. It played a central role in the eventual suppression of the submarine menace.

The American and British planners understood these geographic facts. They were part of the fund of common knowledge these planners used while making decisions on the conduct of the war.

But nothing is foreordained. Just as geographic knowledge can be used to gain an advantage, lack of it or ignoring it can bring disaster. Hitler never had

a good geographic understanding of the United States. He never realized the raw military power that could be generated from the vast economic and industrial potential of the U.S.A. — and it was his downfall.

For Further Reading:

Demko, George. *Why in the World, Adventures in Geography*. NY: Doubleday, 1992. [This book goes into a little more detail than McKinney's. I'd read this one after McKinney's book. It will reinforce and expand your geographic knowledge, yet isn't as dense and formidable as a college geography textbook.]

Huntington, Ellsworth. *Principles of Human Geography*. Fifth edition. NY: John Wiley and Sons, 1920, 1940. [Beware this book! It is useful only in giving the reader some idea of the geographic knowledge and theories of the time. It contains what are now thought to be racist ideas on human development.]

McKinney, Kevin. *Everyday Geography: A Concise, Entertaining Review of Essential Information about the World We Live in*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1993. [A nice little book, useful at giving the reader a general background in world geography.]

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Strategy and Compromise: A Reappraisal of the Crucial Decisions Confronting the Allies in the Hazardous years, 1940 - 1945*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1958. [Read this little book first. Morison won't let you down.]

Weinberg, Gerhard L. *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Pr., 1994. [This thick book can give the reader a solid grounding in the events of World War II.]

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