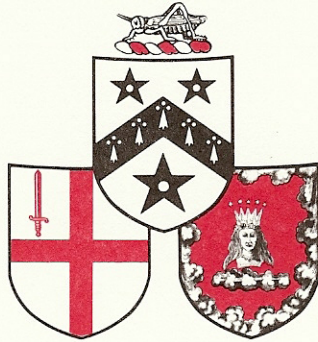


G R E S H A M
COLLEGE



Gresham Special Lecture

*VE DAY:
FIFTY YEARS AFTER*

delivered by

Professor Sir Michael Howard CBE MC

at Mansion House

Wednesday 17 May 1995

Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH

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The tumult and the shouting has died, and the captains and the kings have departed, as they did after a similar celebration nearly a hundred years ago. There is little left to be said. We hardly need the warning Rudyard Kipling gave to our ancestors at the time of the Diamond Jubilee: we were certainly not 'drunk with sight of power' and had no temptation to put our trust in 'reeking tube and iron shard', though defence manufacturers were afforded the opportunity to display their wares in Hyde Park on a scale that some of us found a little excessive. We were all commemorating the achievement not so much of our armed forces as of the British people as a whole. The predominant feeling was one of profound thankfulness that a terrible danger had been averted and a long ordeal bravely borne. There was no triumphalism; only a renewed appreciation of the blessings of peace and a determination to do what we could to preserve it. It had been a good war, in so far as wars can ever be good, and a necessary war – for, alas, wars are still sometimes necessary. We had survived it and eventually, with the help of allies more powerful than ourselves, won it.

The debate will no doubt continue endlessly as to whether it was, as Churchill called it, an 'unnecessary war' – one that could have been avoided if, for instance, we had reacted in 1936 when Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland, or had stood firm over the Munich crisis in 1938. It will continue even more fiercely as to whether we could have fought it more humanely, without the massive and indiscriminate use of air power; whether it was wise or necessary to demand the unconditional surrender of our adversaries; whether we could and should have invaded North-West Europe in 1943 rather than 1944, or conversely whether we should have devoted greater resources to a Mediterranean campaign to liberate Central Europe before the Russians got there. More recent controversies have arisen over whether we should have done more to impede the implementation of 'the final solution' at Auschwitz. Most recent of all is the interesting suggestion that we should have accepted Hitler's peace-terms in 1940 and abandoned Europe to preserve our status as a world power. I have views, and fairly strong ones, on all these questions, but I shall not inflict them on you this evening. I want, rather, to discuss what the war was about, and what the implications have been of our winning it.

I suggest that the war was fought about two quite distinct but overlapping issues. One was power – the menacing power of Germany. The other was ideology – the creed generically known as Fascism, but specifically in Germany as National Socialism or Nazism. The fact that they did overlap made possible a rare degree of consensus in this country. For some, particularly on the right wing, it was a war to contain and if necessary destroy the power of Germany; a continuation of the unfinished business of the First World War. This was a conflict in the tradition of those we had fought against Napoleon and Louis XIV to prevent any single power from dominating the continent of Europe and so placing in hazard the independence of the United Kingdom. This was what Winston Churchill, a historian to his finger-tips, clearly understood, and the message that he projected to the British people. There had certainly been an ideological element in all those previous

wars – the wars against Louis XIV to preserve the Protestant Succession, those against the Revolution and Napoleon to combat despotic egalitarianism. But basically they had been fought to preserve British power and independence, and this was still a simple and understandable cause that rallied the mass of a population to whom the enemy's ideology was secondary, if they were aware of it at all. In the words of G.K. Chesterton:

*I know no harm of Bonaparte and plenty of the Squire,
And for to fight the Frenchman I did not much desire;
But I did bash their baggonets because they came array'd
To straighten out the crooked road an English drunkard made.*

(There is still, it must be said, a certain amount of resentment at the idea of straightening out our crooked roads at the behest of Brussels bureaucrats, but that is another story.)

The growth of German power threatened British independence as had the growth of French power two centuries earlier. That was enough for many people who either knew nothing of Fascism or – a number rather larger than is nowadays generally admitted – who were rather sympathetic to it; certainly rather more so than they were to communism. It was a sympathy that had led many of them to regard Hitler's rise to power with a complaisance they later came to regret. But when the crisis came, all save a handful of unbalanced fanatics rallied to a cry they understood: the defence of their country.

At the other end of the political spectrum was a smaller if more literate group who had ample good-will towards Germany and no sympathy either for traditional British patriotism or for traditional concepts of the balance of power. On a famous occasion some of them declared that they would never again fight for King and Country. But they were bitterly hostile to Fascism wherever it appeared. Many of them had a visceral dislike of the British ruling classes and their ideas, even if they did not see the Soviet Union as a preferable model – as many of them did. Many of them disliked war as much as they did Fascism, and rather pathetically declared their opposition to both. (The agonising of the *New Statesman* over these questions in the 1930s makes instructive if rather sad reading). But when the moment came they also (unless they were hard-core party members) joined the class-enemy in the struggle against Fascism; and even the most tender socialist consciences were set at rest when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941.

For socialists and liberals, then, German power had to be destroyed because it was a vessel of Fascism. For traditionalists, Fascism (or rather National Socialism) was significant only because of the encouragement it gave to German expansionist ambitions and the edge it gave to German power. But German power and ambition had been menacing before Fascism had ever been heard of, and the greatest war in European history had been fought only twenty years before in order to contain it. It is now possible to see the two world wars as a single Thirty Years' War, fought to prevent Germany from establishing her dominance in Europe. In the First World War her further ambition had been to establish her status as a world power by defeating the British Empire, as Britain had established her own status a century earlier through defeating France. In the Second, the conquest of Europe was for Hitler a spring-board for the establishment of a great Euro-Asian Reich in which an Aryan warrior elite would rule over a subordinate helot class and which would be racially purged; purged not only of Jews, but of Blacks, gypsies, homosexuals, and all who did not fit into his preferred stereotypes. But whatever the ultimate objective, the conquest of Europe was the necessary first step. Such was the power and efficiency of the German State, Army and people that they might well have achieved them in the First World War but for the intervention of the United States. They were to achieve it in 1940. If Hitler had not gone on to challenge the Soviet

Union, and had the Japanese not attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, that victory might have been consolidated, and German dominance have been with us still.

The irony is that, given the size of her population, the dominance of her industry, the excellence of her technology and the disciplined activity of her people, Germany might peacefully have achieved a hegemony over Europe without a shot being fired. Paradoxically, it was the militarism of her ruling classes in 1914 and the fanaticism of the Nazis twenty years later that ensured that the preponderance that Britain had achieved in the world during the 19th century was not succeeded by a Germany ascendancy in the twentieth.

As it was, the excellence of German performance in war was matched by an incompetence in statecraft that in both wars accumulated a hostile world alliance which ultimately destroyed her. But the wars fought to contain German power nearly destroyed Europe as well. The First World War ended in the economic exhaustion of the victors and the social and political disintegration of the defeated. The Second uprooted whole populations, reduced major cities to rubble, and destroyed both the will and the capacity of European powers to maintain their Imperial rule throughout the world. Between them, the wars left a vacuum at the heart of the continent that would almost certainly have been filled by Soviet power if the United States had not been persuaded to provide a balance. The old European balance of power was then to be subsumed in the global balance created by the onset of the Cold War and the development of thermonuclear weapons, and the fate of the continent for the next forty years was to lie in the hands of Moscow and of Washington.

As for Germany, she was divided between the victors – a brutal judgement of Solomon, which nobody seems to have foreseen at the time and against which there was general protest. But what alternative was there? Neither the Western allies nor the Soviet Union was prepared to see Germany fall under the domination of their adversaries. Stalin could only trust a Germany that he could control through communist 'democratic centralism'. For the West a communist Germany would have meant, given the strength of the communist parties in France and Italy, effectively a communist Europe. The independent, neutral Germany to which social-democrats in Germany and elsewhere aspired would have been mistrusted by, and a focus for intrigue for, both sides, an unstable morass in the heart of Europe. The stability of post-war Europe could rest only on the division of Germany and the elimination of German power. With hindsight we can see that no other solution was possible, even, perhaps, desirable.

Now that the collapse of Soviet power has made possible the reunification of Germany, should we again tremble? There are many who do, not least in Germany itself. There, as in France, the development of the European Union is seen as a necessary antidote to the danger of revived German nationalism. But let me put forward a hypothesis. What if Imperial Germany at the beginning of this century had not been dominated by a militaristic ruling elite, but had, after unification in 1871, developed into a peaceful social democracy on the British model? Its heavy industries would none the less have dominated Western Europe. Central Europe, perhaps even the Russian Empire, would have become her economic colonies. All other European states, our own included, would probably have sunk economically to second rank, as we were to do anyway in relation to the United States. We would have certainly have resented such a Germany, as we have resented the economic competition of the United States and the United States now resents that of Japan. There would have certainly have been constant friction; but would we have *fought* her? Did we really fight the First World War to prevent German firms from capturing British markets?

Marxists say of course, yes: that was what the First World War was all about; capitalist competition has always been the root cause of war. On the other hand there is that optimistic American school

of thought, derived from Immanuel Kant, that would answer, certainly not: democracies never fight one another. About both views I am sceptical: capitalists are more concerned with profit than with power, and have a remarkable – some would say a sinister – capacity to reach agreement with one another behind the backs of their governments. Indeed the peak of Anglo-German commercial antagonism was passed long before the war actually began. As for the belief in democratic pacifism, the jury is still out. Historically speaking, democracies have not been around for long enough to provide sufficient evidence for dogmatic conclusions, and certainly we, as a democracy, fought a bitter war against another democracy, the Boer Republics in South Africa, nearly a hundred years ago.

I would suggest however that what makes war likely or unlikely is not so much the form of government as the *culture* of the people concerned; whether as a whole they accept war as a necessary fact of life, a normal means of settling disputes; and beyond this, whether they see it as a glorious activity which brings out the best in humanity and provides a Darwinian test of the worthiness of the race to survive.

Before 1914 the acceptance of war as a necessary fact of life was general, not least in this country, and there were still many even here who thought it glorious; the people Kipling had in mind when he wrote his 'Recessional'. But in Germany there dominated an archaic warrior culture, a dominant militarism that, far more than any economic competition, made her universally feared as an unstable force and a dangerous neighbour. 'Prussian militarism' was not a myth created by allied war propaganda. It was a deep-rooted and serious phenomenon, based on a profound philosophical and historiographical tradition that was consciously hostile to all the values of the western enlightenment. Had Germany won the First World War, that militaristic philosophy would have been immeasurably strengthened. As it was, defeat forced it briefly underground, only to reappear in the renewed, populist and lethal form of Fascism, or rather, National Socialism.

Fascism quite consciously rejected the principles of democracy and human rights in favour of those of leadership and national cohesion. It glorified war as a way of life, and saw the future in terms of the successive conquest, subordination and, if need be, the annihilation of inferior peoples. That was the ideology we fought to defeat. Perhaps only a minority in this country even at the time appreciated the depth of its appeal, the extent of its ambitions, and the diabolical ruthlessness of its methods. There were, and still are, those who believe that Hitler was simply a Latin-American-style dictator who could be overthrown by a military coup and replaced by a democratic regime to which 'good Germans' would rally. To my mind this is a myth, and a dangerous one. Hitler's power was based not simply on ruthlessness, but on huge popularity. He achieved for the German people all that they had ever asked, and in his speeches expressed all that they had ever felt. Nazi totalitarianism grew up from below as well as being imposed from above. Its power could be destroyed only by greater power. The society it has infected really had to be defeated, taken over, and remade from top to bottom.

Has it now been remade? Have the Russians and ourselves, in our different ways, destroyed Fascism as well as German power? At present I think we can say that we have; or if not destroyed it, driven it back to the margins of German society where it certainly still survives, as it survives at the margins of our own society and, alas, that of the United States. For Fascism is not so much a creed as a mobilization of prejudices; xenophobia, atavistic resistance to change and modernization, anti-intellectualism, and an attachment to simple, violent solutions. What fascist societies did was to put into power those social elements that exist everywhere but which civilized societies try to suppress. If we are to question the stability of the post-war settlement, we need to ask, not simply

how effectively we have destroyed German power, but if we have eliminated the philosophy that made it so dangerous.

If we have destroyed Fascism in Germany – or at least, destroyed it there as effectively as we have everywhere else – it is not, I suggest, either through the power of reasoned argument, to which it is impervious, nor simply through the application of superior military power. It has been by providing an alternative that has largely removed the causes that led to Fascism to flourish there in the first place. Old-style German militarism of the *pickelhaube* variety was largely a class phenomenon that disappeared as the old feudal landed classes lost their ascendancy. Fascist militarism, on the contrary, was rooted in mass despair – despair at the apparent failure of bourgeois democracy to solve the problems of late-industrial society. The immiseration of the German people after 1918, on a scale barely foreseen even by Karl Marx, certainly had the effect Marx did foresee, in strengthening the hold of communism on the industrial proletariat; but what about those masses who did not belong to the industrial proletariat, and for whom the Soviet model did not offer an attractive alternative? It was to these people – the farmers, the craftsmen, the petty officials, above all the lower middle classes, that Hitler and his like appealed – as well as those in all social classes who resented the judgement of Versailles and were prepared to support anyone who promised to reverse it. Bourgeois democracy, with its doctrine of reason, moderation and compromise, seemed incapable of solving their problems, economic or political. Hitler offered instead emotion, absolutism and, instead of reasoned argument, the Triumph of the Will.

But after 1945 democracy did not fail the Germans. For a few depressing years between 1945 and 1948 it looked again as if it might. A frozen, exhausted, hungry and impoverished Europe seemed ripe, if not for Fascism, then certainly for the rational alternative, communism. Then, courtesy of the United States, bourgeois democracy began to work. The German economy recovered. The Germans – at least the West Germans – became rich, prosperous, contented; too much so for their idealistic young, whose adolescent protests twenty years later against the *embourgeoisement* of their parents took some very ugly forms. Even the East Germans, enslaved under a new form of totalitarianism, were able to create a new society at least more socially equitable and, for many, more prosperous than any they had known in the past. But the patently greater success of capitalism over the border, impossible for their rulers to conceal, made them embrace that at the first opportunity. Democracy was preferable, if not because it provided political justice and greater human rights, but because it provided a higher standard of living even at the cost of reduced economic security. Fascism had resulted not in *Weltmacht*, but in *Niedergang*; not in power, but in annihilation. Communism had produced, not a just and classless society, but an impoverished one run by privileged apparatchiks. Military victory had destroyed the one, economic success the other. As for war as a normal instrument of policy, the development of nuclear weapons had discouraged even the most ruthless exponents of *Machtpolitik*. The evidence is overwhelming, that Germany has been thoroughly debellated; deprived, that is, not so much of the capacity as of the *will* to make war again, and completely re-integrated into the West.

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There are those, again mainly in the United States, who believe that with the triumph of western values, history has now come to an end. All that remains is to mop up some backward areas in the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Africa and elsewhere, and we can then live in peace and prosperity ever after. I am not one of them. My own view is that, if we can learn anything from the past, it is that the solution of each problem that confronts mankind in itself produces new and more complex ones, to the solution of which the experience of the past provides only limited guidance. History is far too ingenious and bloody-minded simply to repeat itself; it is always setting us new and more demanding tests, and so it is today.

You will not want me, on a cheerful occasion such as this, to dampen our enjoyment; but it is salutary to be reminded of the problems that our victory – our double victory over both Fascism and Communism – has left us to grapple with.

What has happened since that victory fifty years ago? Our system worked well enough for a quarter of a century after 1945 – those golden years when, with the help of intelligently developed and applied technology, the standard of living of our peoples was improved beyond their wildest expectations and the luxuries of the rich became the basic necessities of the poor. In despite of Mr. Khrushchev, we were able effectively to bury communism instead of ourselves being the corpse at the funeral. Since then improvements have continued, if at a somewhat slower rate, but we have become increasingly conscious of the systemic weaknesses associated with our strength.

In the first place our economic system, however successfully it provides for the majority, leaves a large minority in want, and it looks horribly as if technological improvements in means of production have created a large and irreducible core not only of unemployed but of unemployables; and not only for one generation but for the foreseeable future. 'The Underclass' is a fashionable but accurate term to describe that large minority in all developed countries who no longer feel part of the political community on which they are an economic dead-weight, and whose very existence is not only a growing burden on, but a standing moral reproach to the prosperity of the majority. The growth of affluence does not appear in itself to provide any answer to this problem that affects, and debilitates, all western societies, and no political party as yet seems able to offer a solution to it. It provides a shadow to our prosperity that the existence of a miserable and marginally employed proletariat did to capitalism a century ago. Ultimately, in spite of Marx's expectations, that proletariat was successfully assimilated; throughout the First World War they fought loyally for their respective nations and the expected world revolution did not happen. Today no one expects world revolution; the underclass can be lulled by welfare benefits into a sullen passivity enlivened only, for its younger members, by drug addiction and crime; but it is hardly a recipe for a healthy society.

In the second place, modernization – the growth of rationalism, egalitarianism, secularisation, and simple hedonism has destroyed many of the traditional values, institutions and habits that previously held our communities together. The subversive effect of modernization on social cohesion has been a source of concern and deep political division in western societies for over two centuries – virtually ever since the French Revolution – but in earlier generations the process was sufficiently gradual for societies successfully to adjust to it. Now the rapidity of change is bewildering. New generations grow up in the belief – superficially self-evidently true – that they have nothing to learn from the past, and that the social framework in which they grew up has outlived its utility. Opportunities for short-term satisfaction for material needs and appetites are unprecedented, and an entire economy has grown up to satisfy them. I know that old men have made this complaint about the world from time immemorial, proclaiming that innovation was destroying civilization as they have known it whereas in fact it was strengthening it and enabling it to survive. Nevertheless it seems to me that today the speed of innovation is not so much renewing our societies as testing their stability almost to destruction.

Finally, this process of modernization – what our forefathers rather optimistically called 'Progress' – is having an infinitely more severe effect in what today we still call, however inaccurately, the Third World. There the economic impact of the West, however benevolently intended and skilfully managed, really has tested the traditions of indigenous societies to destruction, leaving in their place, all too often, anarchy tempered by despotism. This fortunately does not apply to the stable and cohesive communities of Asia, whose mercantile communities have rapidly caught up with the West and are likely to surpass us. It is seen – and, thanks to CNN, quite literally seen – at its

most tragic in the centre of Africa. But it is politically most dangerous in those lands on the fringes of the West, North Africa and Latin America, where massive unemployment among young men abandoning their villages vainly to seek their fortune in cities, and the attraction of the apparently prosperous societies of Western Europe and the United States, is leading to those problems of massive illegal immigration on both sides of the Atlantic with consequences that we all of us know; the growth of racial tensions, trembling on the verge of violence, in all the host countries. As for those that stay behind, they are all too easily recruited into those extremist movements on the fringes of Islam, loosely described as 'Fundamentalist', which are fuelled by a hatred of the West that they see, not inaccurately, as being the cause of all their troubles. The roots of such movements bear a depressing similarity to those that produced Fascism in Europe before the Second World War.

This is not exactly a recipe for the joy and laughter, and peace ever after, that Vera Lynn, bless her heart, promised us during the war; and the usual grumbles were to be heard in the midst of the VE Day celebrations, from those killjoys who wondered what there was to celebrate in the present state of the world. The answer is easy: we can celebrate the fact that we are still here to deal with these problems. I sometimes wonder how we would have responded if some Cassandra had appeared to us in the middle of the war and told us what we had to look forward to after it was over. Initially, a peace kept only by a balance of nuclear terror. Then a Britain shrunk in power, deprived of her Empire, still racked not only by social divisions but by crime and drug-addiction on an unprecedented scale. A Europe where Germany is once more regaining at least economic dominance. A United States so perplexed by its huge internal problems that its capacity for world leadership is being gradually eroded – and which is being rapidly overtaken as world economic leader by Japan. The Balkans once more in bloody turmoil, and the former Soviet Union in near anarchy. Sullen hostility to the West throughout much of the Arab world; nuclear weapons within the reach of highly unstable states; and throughout Africa endemic plague, starvation, and civil war. Would any of this have worried us?

Of course it wouldn't. It seemed to us at the time that anything – literally, *anything* – was preferable to the triumph of Hitler's Empire. After fifty years I see no reason to change my mind. Our response to such a Cassandra would have been "Too bad. But first we have got to win the war". The price of our victory was not only the tragic losses we suffered in gaining it, but the responsibilities and opportunities it brought in its train. Now we have celebrated enough, and have to get back to them.

G R E S H A M

COLLEGE

Gresham College was established in 1597 under the Will of the Elizabethan financier Sir Thomas Gresham, who nominated the Corporation of the City of London and the Worshipful Company of Mercers to be his Trustees. They manage the Estate through the Joint Grand Gresham Committee. The College has been maintained in various forms since the foundation. The one continuing activity (excepting the period 1939-1945) has been the annual appointment of seven distinguished academics 'sufficiently learned to reade the lectures of divyntyte, astronomy, musicke, and geometry' (appointed by the Corporation), 'meete to reade the lectures of lawe, phissicke, and rtheticke', (appointed by the Mercers' Company). From the 16th century the Gresham Professors have given free public lectures in the City. A Mercers' School Memorial Chair of Commerce has been added to the seven 'ancient' Chairs.

The College was formally reconstituted as an independent foundation in 1984. The Governing Body, with nominations from the City Corporation, the Mercers' Company, the Gresham Professors and the City University, reports to the Joint Grand Gresham Committee. Its objectives are to sponsor innovative research and to supplement and complement existing facilities in higher education. It does not award degrees and diplomas, rather it is an active collaborator with institutions of higher education, learned societies and professional bodies.

Gresham College
Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 0171-831 0575

