

ENDS, MEANS, IDEOLOGY, AND PRIDE: WHY THE AXIS LOST AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM ITS DEFEAT

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Why did the Axis Powers lose World War II, and what can we learn from its defeat? The Axis seemed on top of the world until 1941, when it added to its list of enemies the United States and the Soviet Union. The entry of Russia and America into the war decisively tipped the balance against Germany, Italy, and Japan. Resource-rich Russia and the United States were prepared for protracted conflict, whereas the Axis was not. From Pearl Harbor onward, it is difficult to imagine how the Axis could have avoided the fate that befell it, short of Stalin's defection from the Allied side.

Material weakness should have imposed strategic discipline on Axis territorial ambitions, but none of the three major Axis states seemed to recognize the limits of their power. Imperial ambitions, fueled by extreme ideologies, held sway over a realistic grasp of what was possible and what was not.

An examination of World War II's outcome reveals three lessons. First, numbers still matter. The best strategy is to be strong. The strong sometimes lose, but the weak lose more often. Second, ideology can distort sound strategic thinking. Both Germany and Japan were victimized by extreme racial ideologies that prompted them to overestimate their own fighting power and underestimate that of their enemies.

The third lesson is that operational and tactical superiority cannot redeem a faulty strategy. Throughout the war, Germany outperformed its enemies on the battlefield; however, it was still crushed strategically.

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