

Why Democracy is the Dominant Political Form of the Modern World

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The argument about democracy set forth in my letters to David Skrbina of October 12, 2004 (Part II.D) and November 23, 2004 (Part IV.A) is incomplete and insufficiently clear, so I'd like to supplement that argument here.

The most important point I wanted to make was that democracy became the dominant political form of the modern world not as the result of a decision by human beings to adopt a freer or a more humane form of government, but because of an "objective" fact, namely, the fact that in modern times democracy has been associated with the highest level of economic and technological success.

To summarize the argument of my letters to Dr. Skrbina, democratic forms of government (i.e., representative democracy) have been tried at many times and places at least since the days of ancient Athens, yet democracy did not thrive sufficiently to displace authoritarian systems, which remained the dominant political forms through the 17th century. But from the advent of the Industrial Revolution the (relatively) democratic countries, above all the English-speaking ones, were also the most successful countries economically and technologically. Because they were economically and technologically successful, they were also successful militarily. The economic, technological, and military superiority of the democracies enabled them to spread democracy forcibly at the expense of authoritarian systems. In addition, many nations voluntarily attempted to adopt democratic institutions because they believed that those institutions were the source of the economic and technological success of the democracies.

As part of my argument I maintained that the two great military contests between the democracies and the authoritarian regimes—World Wars I and II—were decided in favor of the democracies because of the democracies' economic and technological vigor. The astute reader, however, may object that the democracies could have won World Wars I and II simply by virtue of their great preponderance in resources and in numbers of soldiers, with or without any superiority in economic and technological vigor.

My answer is that the democracies' preponderance in resources and numbers of soldiers was only one more expression of their economic and technological vigor. The democracies had vast manpower, territory, industrial capacity, and sources of raw materials at their disposal because they—especially the British—had built great colonial empires and had spread their language, culture, and technology, as well as their economic and political systems, over a large part of the world. The industrial capacity of the English-speaking peoples moreover made it possible for them to build powerful navies. Consequently they had, generally speaking, command of the sea, which enabled them to assist one another in war by transporting troops and supplies to wherever they might be needed.

Whether or not Germany's industrial capacity was inferior to that of Britain at the start of WWI,¹ it certainly was vastly inferior to the combined industrial capacity

¹ NEB (2003), Vol. 20, "Germany," p. 113 says: "By 1914 Germany was an industrial giant second only to the United States." But *ibid.*, Vol. 29, "World Wars," p. 963, says: "Great Britain's industrial

of Britain and the United States. In any case, the Germans were never able to build a navy capable of facing that of Britain on equal terms, and British naval superiority in WWI was of critical importance. “[T]he outcome of [WWI] ... hinged upon control of the sea by the battleship. Had superiority in battleships passed to Germany, Britain would have been lost... .”² The British naval blockade of Germany was so effective that it prevented almost all trade from reaching German ports,³ with the result that by the end of the war the Germans were on the verge of starvation.⁴ Moreover, command of the sea by the British made it possible for American troops to be brought to Europe in 1918, and it was the arrival of the Americans that broke the stalemate on the western front and led to the Allied victory.⁵ Clearly, therefore, the decisive factor in WWI was a preponderance in resources that had arisen from the superior economic and technological vigor of the English-speaking peoples—comprising Britain together with the English-speaking parts of its colonial empire and its former colonies in North America.

Authoritarian systems either had failed to build colonial empires of comparable size, as in the case of Germany⁶ and Japan, or else they had indeed built huge empires but had left them relatively backward and undeveloped, as in the case of Spain, Portugal, and Russia. It was during the 18th century, as the Industrial Revolution was gathering force, that authoritarian France lost out to semi-democratic Britain in the struggle for colonization of North America and India. France did not achieve stable democracy until 1871, when it was already too late to catch up with the British. Germany as a whole was politically fragmented until 1871, but the most important state in Germany—authoritarian Prussia—was already a great power by 1740⁷ and had access to the

establishment was slightly superior to Germany’s ...,” and Liddell Hart, p. 44, says: “In munitions and other war material Britain’s industrial power was greatest of all... . Britain... was to prove that the strength of her banking system and the wealth distributed among a great commercial people furnished the ‘sinews of war’... .”

² NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “War, Technology of,” p. 597. See also *ibid.*, “World Wars,” p. 963; Liddell Hart, Joe. cit. (“all... .. depended on the security of [Britain’s] sea communications”).

³ NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “World Wars,” p. 969.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 963, 986. *Ibid.*, “War, Theory and Conduct of,” p. 652. *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, “Germany,” p. 116. *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, “International Relations,” p. 814. *World Book Encyclopedia* (2011), Vol. 21, “World War I,” p. 460.

⁵ NEB (2003), Vol. 21, “International Relations,” p. 814. *Ibid.*, Vol. 29, “United States of America,” p. 253. *Ibid.*, “World Wars,” p. 977. Manchester, p. 339. Parker, pp. 307-08. Patterson, p. 121. *World Book Encyclopedia* (2011), Vol. 21, “World War I,” pp. 462-63.

⁶ At the end of the 19th century the German colonial empire was about two thirds the size of the French in geographical extent, but its population amounted to only a fraction of that of the French empire, which in turn had only a fraction of the number of inhabitants of the British empire. See Zimmermann, p. 113 and the map between pp. 254 & 255. Moreover, the German colonies were economically a liability rather than an asset. NEB (2003), Vol. 20, “Germany,” p. 117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96. But further on in the same article the *Britannica* implies that Prussia might not have become a great power until 1763. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

sea,⁸ yet failed to build an overseas empire. Even after the unification of their country in 1871 the Germans' efforts at colonization were half-hearted at best,⁹ and when they at last embarked in 1897 on a serious program of empirebuilding it was too late, for the economically valuable lands had already been taken by other powers.¹⁰

Like the English-speaking peoples, the Spanish- and Portuguesespeaking peoples colonized vast territories and populated them thickly, but the manpower of their territories could not have been used effectively in a European war, because these peoples lacked the economic, technical, and organizational resources to assemble, train, and equip large armies, transport them to Europe, and keep them supplied with munitions while they were there. Moreover, they lacked the necessary command of the sea. The Russians did not need command of the sea in order to transport their men to a European battlefield, but in WWI the Russians proved themselves to be militarily ineffectual.¹¹ In WWII on the other hand the Russians—or strictly speaking the Soviets—played a vitally important role. The Allies won WWII “by the mobilization of superior resources, ruthlessly and often wastefully employed against militarily more

⁸ To this writer the reason why Prussia did not build an overseas empire remains obscure; clarification awaits further research. For now let the following suffice: Prussia's access was to the Baltic rather than directly to the Atlantic. The extra distance to be sailed would have mattered little during the 18th century, when round-the-world voyages were nothing very extraordinary; still less would it have mattered during the 19th century when, with sailing ships of advanced design and later steamships, voyages to all parts of the world were routine. Nor would the shallowness of the Baltic along the Prussian coast have mattered much. The Dutch built ships designed for use in shallow waters, and with such ships they created their far-flung empire. The Prussians could have done likewise. A more serious problem was the fact that the narrow strait connecting the Baltic to the North Sea could be controlled by rival powers that were capable of barring Prussia's access to the Atlantic. So why couldn't Prussia itself have controlled the strait? The reason may have been a decision by Prussian kings to use their resources to make Prussia into a land power rather than a naval one. Such a decision by Louis XIV was possibly the reason why Britain, and not France, became the world's dominant naval and colonial power. Here the crucial factor may have been that, in Prussia and France, power was concentrated in royal hands, whereas, in Britain and the Netherlands, power was shared by the commercial classes. However, my present (tentative) opinion is that even if Prussia had had free access to the Atlantic and a government that left the way to power open to the commercial classes, the Prussians would not have competed successfully with the British, the Dutch, or even the French, because Prussia lacked the economic dynamism that in the far northwestern corner of Europe can be traced all the way back to 600 AD. I suggest, tentatively, that at that time—long before the advent of the “Protestant ethic” or of worldwide colonization—the northwestern corner of Europe was already predestined to the Industrial Revolution. How the economic development of those countries was related to the development of (semi) democratic government remains open to discussion. Because this note is informal and tentative, I omit citation of my sources. But see Lebecq; Mahan, pp. 55, 58, 98, 102, 107.

⁹ Zimmermann, p. 28. NEB (2003), Vol. 20, “Germany,” p. 114 (“Apart from a few colonial additions in the mid 1880s, Germany ... acted as a satiated power.”).

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹ E.g., Ulam, pp. 127-29. The Russians may nevertheless have played an important role in the Allied victory, because their invasion of East Prussia forced the Germans to send troops from the western front to the eastern and thus helped the French and the British to win the crucial First Battle of the Marne. NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “World Wars,” pp. 965-67.

skillful foes,”¹² and those superior resources included Soviet manpower: The numerically vast Soviet armies did by far the greatest part of the fighting against the German Wehrmacht. But it’s unlikely that Soviet manpower alone could have prevailed against Germany. German military efficiency was so far beyond that of the Soviets that the Germans suffered only 3/ million military deaths in *WWII*—including deaths suffered in fighting the Western Allies—as against somewhere between 6 and 20 million military deaths for the Soviet Union.¹³ Undoubtedly the **kill** ratio in favor of the Germans would have been far higher if the Soviets had not received help from the West on a massive scale—help that was made possible only by the overwhelming economic and technological power of the English-speaking peoples. This help had three components: (i) Enormous quantities of military hardware and other products of Western industry were shipped to the Soviet Union.¹⁴ (ii) Important resources that the Germans could

¹² Ibid., “War, Theory and Conduct of,” p. 654. Astor, p. 975. Wheeler, p. 129 (citing Crevelld: U.S. Army’s style of fighting in WWII was based on superior economic and technological resources). Production by U.S. industry in WWII dwarfed that of every other nation. E.g.: NEB (2003), Vol. 21, “International Relations,” pp. 848-49, 853. Jenkins, p. 678. Parker, pp. 341, 415. Keegan, p. 219. The Battle of Britain may have been won not by superior performance of Britain’s aviators, but by the fact that Britain was producing fighter aircraft at twice the rate of Germany. Jenkins, pp. 632-33. Gilbert, *European Powers*, p. 260. For Western Allies’ superiority in cryptology and radar see, e.g., Dunnigan & Nofi, pp. 303, 315, 385; Parker, pp. 329-330; NEB (2003), Vol. 16, “Cryptology,” pp. 869, 871. Even where the Western Allies were initially at a technological disadvantage, they had the resources to develop needed technology quickly and surpass their adversaries. E.g., at the outset of the war in the Pacific the Japanese Zero fighter was superior to anything the U.S. could put in the air, but by the end of the war the U.S. was producing fighter aircraft that easily outclassed the Zero. Dunnigan & Nofi, e.g., p. 35.

¹³ NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “World Wars,” p. 1 023, Table 7, notes ** and +. See also *ibid.*, p. 1004; Ulam, p. 556 (up to Nov. 6, 1941, Soviet armies suffered more than four times as many casualties as Germans). According to Helmuth James von Moltke, at about the beginning of Sept. 1941, ten Russians were being killed or wounded for every four Germans. A. Read & D. Fisher, p. 88. Once Austria and other territories had been annexed, Germany had a population of 80 or 90 million. Rothfels, p. 156, quoting Churchill (80 million). Kosthorst, p. 122, quoting Mussolini (90 million). The population of the Soviet Union was about 170 million. Ulam, p. 460. In view of the kill ratio in favor of the Germans, the Soviets’ roughly two-to-one advantage in manpower wouldn’t have amounted to much if the Western Allies had been out of the picture.

¹⁴ Keegan, p. 215 (“[N]either the British nor the Soviet economy could have borne the strains of war without external assistance. That outside help came from the United States.”), 218. NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “World Wars,” pp. 997, 999, 1012, 1019. Dunnigan & Nofi, pp. 2, 276, 516. Ulam, p. 581. Scott, p. 56. Dunaway, p. 52. Tim Wright, pp. 59-64. “Post-war Soviet propaganda claims Lend-Lease aircraft [from the U.S.] did not play a significant role in the Soviet defeat of Germany because they represented only 13 percent of the aircraft the Soviets fielded.” *Ibid.*, p. 65. However, that argument overlooks the fact that the Germans’ best opportunity to defeat the Soviet Union was during the early stages of the war, before the Soviet factories east of the Urals could be brought fully into production. According to Field Marshal Montgomery, “White Russia” (Belarus) and Ukraine had contained “about 60 per cent of the Russian [i.e., Soviet] industrial potential,” Law, p. 455, and within six months of the German attack on June 22, 1941, all but a small part of this area—by November 1942 virtually all of it—was under control of the fascists, NEB (2003), Vol. 29, “World Wars,” p. 991 (map) & p. 1011 (map). During these early stages, aid from the U.S. surely was necessary to prevent a German victory. See Ulam, pp. 561, 562. It

otherwise have applied on the eastern front were used instead against the West.¹⁵ (iii) Command of the sea by the Western democracies prevented the importation to Germany of resources from overseas.¹⁶ Even with the help they received from the West, the Soviets' victory may have been a near thing;

Ulam indicates that by the end of the war "the Soviet armies had bled and were almost as exhausted as the Wehrmacht."¹⁷

If we were to assume nevertheless that the Soviets could have defeated Germany without help from the West, that fact would be largely irrelevant for our purposes. Without major participation by the West, the outcome of a struggle between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia would only have determined which of two totalitarian systems would become the world's dominant power. What mattered for the future of democracy was the fact that in WWII *the West* was victorious and demonstrated its overwhelming military superiority—superiority that depended on the democracies' economic and technological vigor.

In view of what I've said in this appendix and in my letters to Dr. Skrbina of October 12 and November 23, 2004, it seems beyond argument that democracy became the dominant political form of the modern world as a result of the democracies' outstanding economic and technological vigor. It may nevertheless be questioned whether democratic government was the *cause* of the economic and technological vigor of the democracies. In the foregoing discussion I've relied mainly on the example of the English-speaking peoples. In fact, France, following its democratization in 1871 and

should also be noted that for the first couple of years of the war, Soviet production of fighter aircraft was carried out according to American designs and with tooling provided by the U.S. NEB (2003), Vol. 21, "Industries, Manufacturing," p. 538.

¹⁵ Prior to the Western Allies' cross channel invasion of the European continent that began in June 1944 the Germans had to fight the Allies in North Africa and Italy, and this may have been the reason for the German defeat at the great Battle of Kursk in July 1943. Ulam, p. 585. A. Read & D. Fisher, pp. 121–22, claim that Kursk, rather than Stalingrad, was the turning point on the eastern front. In addition, a part of Germany's industrial capacity was diverted to the production of submarines for use against the West. But most importantly, the Western Allies' strategic bombing campaign deprived Germany of air superiority on the eastern front because the Germans were forced to withdraw many of their aircraft from the east and use them instead for the defense of their cities. NEB (2003), Vol. 20, "Germany," p. 124. Dunnigan & Nofi, p. 634. "Air superiority was crucial to the outcome of most of the decisive campaigns of WWII..." NEB (2003), Vol. 29, "War, Technology of," p. 612.

¹⁶ Parker, p. 323. See also Ulam, p. 517. Most importantly, the Allied blockade prevented Germany from importing oil from overseas. The Germans' difficult position in regard to oil and their consequent desire to capture the Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus may have prevented them from striking a "killer blow" at Moscow during the summer of 1941, *World Book Encyclopedia* (2011), Vol. 21, "World War II," p. 477; NEB (2003), Vol. 29, "World Wars," p. 999, and it certainly motivated their drive toward the Caucasus in 1942, *ibid.*, p. 1004; Parker, pp. 323–24, 338. This drive led to the disastrous German defeat at Stalingrad, *ibid.*, p. 338, which was probably the turning point of the war on the eastern front. The Germans were mistaken in believing that they could not continue the war without the oil of the Caucasus, NEB (2003), *Joe. cit.*, but they would not have made that mistake if the Allied blockade had not prevented them from importing oil from overseas.

¹⁷ Ulam, p. 604. Wehrmacht = the German armed forces.

even before the devastation wrought by World War I, was *not* economically vigorous.¹⁸ Was the economic and technological vigor of the English-speaking peoples perhaps the result, not of their democratic political systems, but of some other cultural trait?

For present purposes the answer to this question is not important. The objective fact is that since the advent of the Industrial Revolution democracy has been generally associated with economic and technological vigor. Whether this association has been merely a matter of chance, or whether there is a causative relation between democracy and economic and technological vigor, the fact remains that the association has existed. It is this objective fact, and not a human desire for a freer or a more humane society, that has made democracy the world's dominant political form.

It is true that some peoples have made a conscious decision to adopt democracy, but it can be shown that in modern times (at least since, say, 1800) such decisions have usually been based on a belief (correct or not) that democracy would help the peoples in question to achieve economic and technological success.¹⁹ But even assuming that democracy had been chosen because of a belief that it would provide a freer or a more humane form of government, and even assuming that such a belief were correct, democracy could not have thriven under conditions of industrialization in competition with authoritarian systems if it had not equaled or surpassed the latter in economic and technological vigor.

Thus we are left with the inescapable conclusion that democracy became the dominant political form of the modern world not through human choice but because of an objective fact, namely, the association of democracy, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, with economic and technological success.

¹⁸ NEB (2003), Vol. 19, "France," p. 521.

¹⁹ See Appendix Six.

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