

The 'unnecessary necessity' The Century in World War II: The *Century* in World War II

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [July 5, 2000](#) issue

At first the editors of the *Century*, like most others who viewed the situation from afar, failed to appreciate the threat posed by the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. By May 1933, a few months after Hitler assumed the position of chancellor, editorials began to take the rise of fascism more seriously. But in Hitler's early years, editors used German activities to drive home the point that the punitive treaty of Versailles had been an absolute failure. "We who defeated Germany," one editorial stated boldly, "helped to make Hitler" (May 10, 1933).

Protestant criticism of Versailles became commonplace within ten to 15 years after the First World War. In addition, portions of blame for the war began to settle on other European nations. American Protestants began to recognize the culpability of others, particularly Russia and France. British imperialism also became a popular target. During the early-to-mid-1930s, the *Century* routinely treated these themes. Hitler's atrocities had to be understood in light of these contexts.

Because of the shame they continued to feel for their unqualified blessing of World War I, many Protestants were hesitant to bless another war. Those at the *Century* were no exception. As the issue of Prohibition faded, editorials throughout the 1930s regularly expressed a strong antimilitaristic tone. Though editorials condemned Nazi totalitarianism and used phrases like "the madman of Berlin" to describe Hitler (March 27, 1935), they also held out hope that war was "not inevitable" (April 8, 1936). As Europe moved toward war, the *Century* idealistically encouraged American neutrality. It wasn't that the editors were isolationist. The *Century*, for example, supported the Emergency Peace Campaign of 1936. This group included many outstanding Protestant leaders who advocated an international platform of initiatives. Like most good internationalists, *Century* editors urged American participation in both the League of Nations and the World Court. On the other hand,

they argued that Hitler was not America's problem. They railed against military preparedness at home. But theirs was not a pacifist line either, even though some noted pacifists wrote for their pages. Editor Charles Clayton Morrison was neither a pacifist nor an isolationist. He just sounded like both occasionally.

While Morrison's position on the emerging war had its detractors at the time, his understanding of the Jewish situation during the war received considerable criticism afterward. By the mid-1930s, the *Century* was writing about the "plight of the Jews in Germany, Poland and Rumania" (Dec. 30, 1936), but the editors were bewildered as to what to do about it. They could not bring themselves to support a Palestinian homeland, though they did not neglect the refugee question. In 1938 one editorial counted some 660,000 Jews in Germany and Austria needing resettlement. But where could they go?

Quotas in America were limited to 27,000 Germans and Austrians per year. Considering quotas in all other countries, one expert estimated it would take some 16 years to absorb those needing immediate relief. "Most of them," the editorial concluded, "will be dead long before that from starvation and general misery" (Aug. 31, 1938). But lifting immigration barriers in America and elsewhere would not solve the problem either. With 10 million unemployed in the U.S., and others barely earning a living wage, allowing large numbers of impoverished Jewish refugees into the country would only "add just that much more to the economic chaos." "We make no attempt," the editors confessed, "to disguise our bafflement" (Nov. 30, 1938).

Though the editors were horrified by fascist attitudes, and countered domestic anti-Semitism wherever it appeared, they were mostly blind to the limitations of their own WASPish perspectives. They were, in short, typical Protestant liberals. They considered the possibility of a Jewish massacre in Germany as early as 1938, but tended to dismiss it. Because they had been burned by Christian susceptibility to baseless propaganda during World War I, they were not inclined to believe the worst stories about enemy behavior in this war (Sept. 13, 1944). Instead, they relied on the State Department for information, which was less than forthcoming about what it knew. Only later, after gazing into the pit of hell with the rest of the world, did they learn the truth about the Nazis' extermination campaign (May 9, 1945).

As the Axis powers began snatching territory across three continents, the journal pounced on every American action hinting at involvement in the war. The *Century* found Roosevelt's "delay in applying the neutrality law to the war in China"

unacceptable (Aug. 11, 1937). Editors condemned the president's desire to place an embargo of munitions only against the "aggressor" nation instead of against "both belligerents" (Sept. 15, 1937). Other Protestant leaders knew that true neutrality, once applied to the Japanese attack on China, would only end up favoring the Japanese. Reinhold Niebuhr represented the latter view in the *Century* and pointed out the irony of Morrison's position:

How bravely and naïvely the Christian peace advocates identified the very relative policy of neutrality with the absolute demands of the Christian gospel! Now they find themselves in the nice position of having no other justification for this policy than that of complete social and political irresponsibility. Only a few years ago these same peace forces were preaching international responsibility and crying to heaven against the tendency toward isolationism in America! (Sept. 29, 1937).

Niebuhr's criticism carried little weight with Morrison. "It is hard for us to see wrong being done anywhere without leaping in to stop the wrongdoer," he wrote. "But after the leap, what? It is time for the nation to consider that question soberly and with the utmost realism. And it is time for the churches to awake to all the moral perils which war involves" (Feb. 16, 1938).

Even the fall of Czechoslovakia did not move Morrison and his staff from their basic conviction that world war would not solve the problem posed by figures like Hitler and Mussolini (Sept. 28, 1938). Between 1938 and American entry into the war a few years later, the *Century* backed a posture of "negotiation, not battleships" (Nov. 16, 1938). It preferred a negotiated peace to a "victor's peace" (March 12, 1941); the former would last longer. Morrison especially supported the call of many church leaders to assemble a world economic conference to address the economic inequalities in Europe. As Europeans moved toward war, editorials stressed the sins of empire building, whether of the English or German variety. The *Century* emphasized the need for America to remain "aloof" from such blatant power politics (April 12, 1939). Though, after the war began, editorials readily admitted that American sympathies naturally rested with the Allies, they also reminded Americans of "the Allies' own share of responsibility for the war" (Nov. 22, 1939). In essence, this was a "war of empires" (Nov. 29, 1939). Morrison feared the end of the war would bring yet another Allied scramble for spoils.

Neutrality advocates like Morrison believed participation in war would have a terribly negative impact upon America's ability to lead abroad, and to defend freedoms and protect the gains of social legislation at home (June 5, 1940). They also feared the growing power of the American presidency during Roosevelt's watch. By the presidential election of 1940, the *Century* opposed Roosevelt with all its strength. Harold Fey declared that the war would grant Roosevelt a virtual "dictatorship" (Jan. 24, 1940). Morrison supported Wendell Willkie's presidential challenge in 1940 because Roosevelt had already gathered enough power to add up to the "'makings' of an American fascism" (Oct. 16, 1940). Congress had seemingly lost all ability to resist. Roosevelt "arrogated to himself arbitrary powers until . . . all congressional restraint on the president was denied and a precedent established which destroys the fundamental constitutional concept of legislative check on executive action" (Oct. 23, 1940). Calls for universal military conscription stoked these editorial fires as well (July 17, 1940).

The rift between Niebuhr and the editorial policy of the *Century* grew after 1939. Once the European war started, the distance between neutrality and intervention became too pronounced to find space in the same columns. This chasm played midwife to the birth of a new journal, *Christianity & Crisis*, in early 1941. Niebuhr, as an editor, used the journal to negate the idealistic influence of the *Century*. Just before the publication of Niebuhr's first issue, the *Century* challenged Niebuhr's theological rationalization for war, viewing it as encouraging the possibility that "the Figure of Christ" might fade "out of the Christian conscience."

The current emphasis upon the inevitability of evil in the human choices necessitated by man's living in a world of relative values and relative means for attaining them is a sound emphasis. But the polemical use that is made of it in the present crisis is unsound, unjust and perilous for the Christian faith. In effect, Christians are asked to banish Christ from his place in the gate of the Temple and the gate of the City, and to relegate him to a "higher" place in some transcendental sphere well removed from the gross realities and relativities of the temporal scene. With Christ thus lifted far about the relativities of this world, the Christian is then left free to go bravely about his necessary sinning in the real world without confronting Christ or being bothered by him (Jan. 22, 1941).

Six weeks before Pearl Harbor, an editorial denounced the argument of Christian interventionists as “fallacious,” one built upon “no foundation but shifting sand” (Oct. 29, 1941).

When, in November, Niebuhr called for the repeal of the Neutrality Act, terming it “immoral” for its “evasion or denial of moral responsibility,” the *Century* responded that Niebuhr ought to have known better. The law served as a check against “private interests in America which might force the United States into war against its will.” Niebuhr’s characterization of the law betrayed “the degree in which moral judgment may become warped and perverted by war passion.” In short, Niebuhr’s characterization denied “the moral right of a nation to be neutral at all” and “logically leads to the positive conclusion that belligerent participation (presumably on the ‘right’ side) in any war in the world is the moral duty of every nation.”

In an editorial written before Pearl Harbor but published in the issue just afterward, Morrison described the interventionists as “romanticists.” In his attempt to turn the tables on those who viewed themselves as realists, Morrison argued that the interventionists entertained romantic visions of what would result if only Hitler were crushed. A world dominated by Anglo-American interests, the interventionists like Niebuhr asserted, “could be established without raising up against it the hatred and opposition of all the rest of the world.” “This,” wrote Morrison, “is romantic utopianism in its purist form.”

Morrison identified the *Century* with the group he described as the “realists.” These were the noninterventionists who “let the world situation speak for itself and who derive their conception of America’s duty from an objective analysis of what that situation actually is, and what effects are likely to flow from America’s belligerent participation in or her abstention from the conflict.” When one views the facts of this war objectively, Morrison concluded, “every national interest and every moral obligation to civilization dictates that this country shall keep out of the insanity of a war which is in no sense America’s war” (Dec. 10, 1941). By staying out of the war, America could better help to create a just world order after the war ended.

But Pearl Harbor changed everything. The lead *Century* editorial announced no choice but to accept American involvement in war as the “unnecessary necessity.” After Pearl Harbor there could no longer be any “escape from the necessity of decision.” The “tragedy of war” brought only expressions of grief, remorse and contrition (Dec. 17, 1941). During the war years, the *Century* generally turned its

attention to questions surrounding postwar construction of a meaningful peace.

In the months immediately following Pearl Harbor, Morrison offered theological reflections on the meaning of the war. He used the category of “tragedy” to communicate that human beings often find themselves involved in situations “from which there is no escape save by doing monstrous evil.” “It is not the suffering,” he wrote, “but the moral predicament of the sufferer that constitutes the tragedy” (Jan. 7, 1942).

Building upon his theological conviction that “God is the Lord of history,” Morrison sought a way to describe God as active in the midst of the tragedy of war. Christians could not be true to this theological affirmation if they pushed God into the transcendent realm where this war was none of his business. Neither could they be true to a Christian understanding of God if they claimed that divine allegiance rested solely with the Allied war efforts. Instead, Morrison offered the theological insight that this war represented the active judgment of God in history. Every nation has been called before the judgment seat of God to receive the verdict: “Guilty.” “God does not command us to fight; he condemns us to fight.” In the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, Morrison described the war as God’s judgment upon the human inability to represent the will of God within the world (Jan. 14, 1942).

The Christian knows no way to respond to a divine judgment save the way of repentance, because God’s judgment is always the divine side of an event in human experience of which man’s sin is the human side. The Christian cannot escape the judgment; he can only accept it, suffer it, endure it and, as a Christian, penitently face the guilt of it and implore the grace and forgiveness of God (May 6, 1942).

Prior to 1941, the *Century* represented, in many ways, a naïve approach to the threat posed by Hitler and an underestimation of the ways that totalitarianism threatened not just the old imperialistic and colonial habits, but the quality of human life itself throughout Europe and Asia. Where Niebuhr worried about the total triumph of tyranny abroad if America failed to act, Morrison feared the disintegration of American values here at home, and the promise they held for the world, if America did act. Though Niebuhr and Morrison differed on these and other points, they both sought the voice of God, and occasionally heard it, in the midst of a world consumed by war. This transcendent perspective served to remind them and others of the ever-present gap between God’s will and human action, especially in the

context of war. Through their writings, they helped leaders within the church avoid the kinds of self-righteous justifications that had dominated Christian response to World War I.