

EC224: War & Economy in the Twentieth Century

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The module leader is [Mark Harrison](#)

[My termtime office hours](#)

Should I select this module?

Here are some good reasons to select this module: If you are interested in big, important questions at the interface between economics, politics, and history; If you enjoy meeting challenges that unsettle your prior beliefs; If you wish to understand more about how wars have arisen, how they have been waged, and with what consequences; If you seek the perspective on current conflicts around the world that only a knowledge of history and evidence can provide.

In teaching this module I follow some of my own interests. One precaution available to you is to check these out by dipping into [the books and articles I have written](#).

In choosing this module, be aware of the downside. It is not an easy option; if you take this module seriously, there will be times when it will make your brain hurt. Choose it if you long to acquire new knowledge and if you are ready to apply the economic concepts and standard quantitative methods you have already learned to material that is complex, unfamiliar, and at times disturbing. Avoid it if you don't like reading a lot or working hard; it will only make you miserable.

How much work will I have to do?

This is a 15-credit module, which implies an average burden of 150 hours of work. In other words, during a 10-week term the typical student is likely to spend between two and three weeks doing nothing but study for this module, including about half a week in lectures and seminars, and the remainder of the time reading along with the lectures and seminars and researching and writing the essay; and, in the summer, a further week or so revising for and sitting the exam.

These are average expectations; for some it will be more and for others less. Simple economics suggests that you should allocate more effort where the return is higher. The return to your efforts on this module will be higher, the more knowledge and talent you bring to bear and the more intrinsic interest you derive from the subject matter, and so the more time you will willingly give it.

What should I do to achieve the learning objectives?

First, learn about what happened in the twentieth century. Unless you previously studied twentieth century history, don't underestimate how much you may need to learn -- and learn it sooner, not later. You will fail to make sense of the course if you are continually confused about which side Italy was on in which war, or the difference between massive retaliation and flexible response. The way to acquire this knowledge is through reading. Plenty of specialized reading is easily available from the module website. But many of you will also benefit from reading more widely. Reading different accounts from different national and personal perspectives will provide you with a foundation of knowledge on which you can then build.

Second, remember that scholarship is more than just being able to tell an interesting story. History is full of interesting stories, many of which turn out to be misleading or untrue on closer inspection. Wars, in particular, give rise to folk myths and national legends. As you write the story, with every sentence that you write, ask yourself: What does this mean? Where is the evidence?

Let me clarify these two questions.

- "What does this mean?" Meaning comes from logic and, in our discipline, from the logic of economic theory. In this module we will apply a wide range of economic concepts, including but not limited to public goods and the prisoner's dilemma; the micro- and macroeconomic implications of price and quantity controls; rent seeking, lobbying, and bargaining; the complementarity and substitutability of "strategic" resources; the role of economic ideas in making national policies; and the long run effects of capital gains and losses.
- "Where is the evidence?" Evidence provides illustration, but better still is the critical thinking that checks the evidence continually against selection bias (someone filtered the data to confirm our hypothesis), confirmation bias (we filtered the data to confirm our hypothesis), and the chance of making Type I errors (when we confuse the noise in a small sample with a significant pattern).

How should I prepare for the module?

For some of you, your first problem may be to understand what happened in the twentieth century. Those of you that are relatively unfamiliar with the subject matter will benefit from preparatory reading. Here are some recommendations. First, Oxford University Press publishes a paperback series of "Very Short Introductions." These include Martin Howard (2007), *The First World War*, Gerhard L. Weinberg (2014), *The Second World War*, and Robert J. McMahon (2003), *The Cold War*. These are the main conflicts that we will study.

As you read, it may help you to refer to the [maps and timelines](#) provided with this module.

You should also feel free to browse among the many popular history books with titles like *War in the Trenches*, *Blitzkrieg* or *Bomber Command*, and books about Hitler, Stalin, and other war leaders, the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes tribunals, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cuban missile crisis, and so on.

If you want to go beyond the general accounts, more analytical and economically focused but still general and readable histories include Niall Ferguson (1998), *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (Basic Books), and, on World War II, Richard Overy (2005), *Why the Allies Won* (Pimlico).

Whether or not you read them for the module, every economist should read Geoffrey Brennan and Gordon Tullock (1982), "An Economic Theory of Military Tactics: Methodological Individualism at War," in the *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 3(2-3), pp. 225-42. Everyone, economist or not, should read John Keegan's classic (1976), *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (Jonathan Cape).

Recently I wrote my own introduction to a book on "The Economics of Coercion and Conflict," which the publisher has **made available online**.

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