

## WORLD WAR II AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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### Abstract

The article explores the evolution of the international system, emphasizing how global conflicts – especially the two World Wars – reshaped international relations. The author argues that the international system has existed since ancient times, but the Westphalian moment (1648) marked the beginning of its modern era. The war is portrayed as a human choice, driven by ambition, ideology, and the pursuit of power. In the 20th century, growing interdependencies made wars more contagious and widespread.

World War I revealed the limits of the balance of power, prompting Wilson's proposal for a liberal international order through the Versailles System. However, the failure of states to uphold its principles led to World War II. Hitler exploited Western weaknesses, forming the Axis and signing strategic pacts with Italy and the USSR. Initially neutral, the US became the "arsenal of democracy," playing a decisive role in defeating the Axis.

Allied conferences (Tehran, Yalta, Potsdam) shaped the postwar system, but compromises allowed Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe. The postwar world was dominated by bipolarity – US vs. USSR – with NATO and the Warsaw Pact reflecting this divide. Although Wilsonian ideals were invoked, realpolitik and power politics prevailed.

The author concludes that the international system must be constantly adapted to global realities. Negotiation should replace transformative wars, which are destructive. History shows that great powers often prefer global competition, risking future conflicts unless international institutions are reformed.

**Keywords:** World War II, Europe, United States of America, International System.

The history and theory of international relations identify the international system as one of their central themes. Historians and researchers in the field of political science do not always agree on the role of the international system in the unfolding of international relations. This is not the place to intervene in this debate. I would like to point out that my opinion is close to that of Buzan & Little, who argue that the international system has had a place in universal history since the emergence of states as interacting actors. ("States form a system to the extent that

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they interact with each other on a regular basis and to the extent that their interaction affects the behavior of each state.”<sup>1</sup> By and large, these interactions can be classified as either competitive, conflictual or cooperative. For their part, competition and cooperation have certain characteristics, most often determined by the volume and quality of power held by one or another of the acting entities or by their associations. According to this conception, the international system has existed since ancient times and has had various characteristics depending on the historical period. From this perspective, the Westphalia moment (1648) did not mark the historical emergence of the international system, as presented by many theorists of international relations. But we emphasize that what was called the Westphalian System inaugurated the modern era of the international system. Even if there are objections to Wallerstein’s exposition, we must acknowledge that his reasoning, focused primarily on economics and market forces, is convincing when he argues that, in the 17th century, “the modern world system took the form of a capitalist world economy that had its genesis in Europe.”<sup>2</sup> And the Thirty Years’ War would have been the trigger for a broad process of transformation, including the “redistribution of economic roles” of state, economic – military, and even moral factors. Since then, the state has been recognized as the main systemic actor in international relations. We emphasize, however, that this is not just a systemic analytical approach, since the international system itself has become an actor in international relations, with an increasingly significant impact in the 19th century (the Holy Alliance and the European Concert) and in the 20th century, with the proposed Versailles System (1919–1920).

War is a phenomenon triggered and sustained by people who are organized into societal formations. We were accustomed to use von Clausewitz’s definition, which stated that war is an act of violence generated by the desire to subject the aggressor to the will of the adversary. Margaret MacMillan is even more explicit when she says that “war can be waged for honor, survival, or control.”<sup>3</sup> In expressing the raw form of power, it should be added that parties violently engaged in conflict choose war of their own free will, even though alternative means of dispute resolution exist. Only the people who wield power in society decide to commit one society or another to war. The historian Appian, writing about the conflicts of Caesar’s time, said he decided to describe such interactions in the Roman Empire “because these facts deserve to be known by those who want to understand the boundless ambition of men, their unquenchable thirst for power,

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *Sistemele internaționale în istoria lumii* [*International Systems in World History*] (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Sistemul mondial modern* [*The Modern World-System*], vol. 3 (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1993), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Războiul. Cum ne-au modelat conflictele* [*War. How Conflicts Shaped Us*] (Bucharest: Trei, 2022), 24.

their unwavering fortitude, as well as the endless forms of misfortune.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Margaret MacMillan was also right when she warned that we should not get used to the idea that war is an implacable fact of society, but that we need to explore the factors that generate this phenomenon, characteristics of human behavior that would be dominated by negative feelings such as greed, fear, specific ideologies, etc. And in *The War of the World* (2006), Niall Ferguson added another dangerous human experience – hatred – which is said to underlie the instigation of wars, including those of the 20th century.

What makes the modern international system stand out is the strengthening of interdependencies between countries and other types of actors. However, these interdependencies can make war highly contagious, involving several states and spreading regionally or globally. Furthermore, interdependencies have the capacity to contribute to the structure of the international system through the distribution and redistribution of economic and military capabilities, which, in turn, can trigger reactions from states, even leading to violent interactions.<sup>5</sup> Highlighting the phenomenon of “war contagion,” Geller & Singer also refer us to the study of last century’s wars. Of particular importance, however, is their reference to the possibility that disruptions in the international system could provide impetus for the outbreak of widespread and extreme conflicts. After the Napoleonic Wars, the international system was regulated by the balance of power, with wars breaking out only when that balance was disrupted for various reasons, ranging from the overestimation of a Great Power’s capabilities to the formation of distinct alliances between Great Powers. With colonial disputes intensifying at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the European Great Powers were unable to maintain the balance of power, thus leading to the First World War. In fact, as some politicians and analysts have said, in 1914 the Second Thirty Years’ War broke out!<sup>6</sup>

The First World War created the perception that European and international policies of the Great Powers could no longer be managed through the balance of power, and US President Woodrow Wilson proposed to the belligerents, towards the end of the conflagration, a renewal of the international system, strengthening the recognition of the role of the nation – state in the system, making greater use of international law, encouraging interaction between the actors in the system to adopt cooperation and maintain world peace through the League/Society of Nations, emphasising the characteristics of a liberal international order based on the equality of all states and the guidance of their external actions by international rules and

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<sup>4</sup> Appian, *Istoria Romei. Războaiele civile* [Roman History. Civil Wars] (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1957), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel S. Geller and J. David Singer, *Nations at War. A Scientific Study of International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25.

<sup>6</sup> W. M. Spellman, *A Concise History of the World Since 1945. States and Peoples* (London: MacMillan International, 2020), 15.

institutions, i.e. giving an even greater importance to the international system. The Versailles system, the name given to the post – war international system, had both advocates and detractors from the time it was drafted at the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920). The US itself withdrew from this systemic construct (1920), and Soviet Russia/the Soviet Union stayed out until the fourth decade, when the weaknesses of the system were already evident. The rules laid down for the functioning of the system were violated by the very signatory states, which preferred a return to the balance of power between the Great Powers, unable to reconcile justice with equity and peace at the level of the international system.<sup>7</sup> This behavior was generated by the outdated political culture and habits of the political leaders of the interwar period, but also by the emergence and expansion of totalitarian, nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and other ideologies that could not be contained by the liberal currents of the time. This led, in turn, to a continuation of the conflict that had precipitated the First World War, triggering the second major global conflagration of the first half of the 20th century. The generation that lived through the horrors of 1914–1918, and in some places even 1919–1920, ended up witnessing and enduring another world war (1939–1945), which was way more destructive than the one before. They lived under the illusion that peace would follow 1918, but the interwar period was more of an armistice in which the Great Powers promised to build peace but only succeeded in continuing on the path to World War II. This is why Charles de Gaulle referred to the period between 1914 and 1945 as the Second Thirty Years' War.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike World War I, when the parties to the conflict did not openly acknowledge that the international system in which they operated was flawed and prone to war, in the case of World War II, both the initiators of the conflagration and the opposing parties stated clearly that the Versailles System did not suit them and had to be removed, while the others said that the Great Powers and the states of the League of Nations system did not have the will and/or the capacity to uphold the principles, frameworks, and rules of the post – war international system. The belligerents of World War II thus entered the conflagration not only with the intention of winning, but also of reconfiguring the international system after the conflict ended. That is why I have chosen to address the topic stated in the title.

After the breakup of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, it became clear even to England and France that the conciliatory tactics they had adopted toward Hitler did nothing but encourage him to continue his conquest of new territories and the reconfiguration of the European power system. In this context, the appeasers Chamberlain and Daladier realized that a coalition of states was needed to oppose

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Hodges, *The Background of International Relations. Our World Horizons* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1931), 669; Mark R. Amstutz, *The Rules of the Game: A Primer on International Relations* (Boulder/London: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 106.

<sup>8</sup> André Versaille, ed., *Penser le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle [Thinking the 20th Century]* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1990), 119.

Nazi Germany. And the first formula they proposed was the creation of a “Grand Alliance” between England, France, and the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> However, Moscow continued to interpret the gesture made by the leaders of France and England in Munich (1938) as an attempt by the West to form a coalition designed to force the Soviet Union to face German aggression alone. Stalin, though, saw a chance to get the Soviet Union involved in a new game of power balance on the European continent. Accordingly, on March 18, 1939, he proposed to London and Paris that a conference of six states – the Soviet Union, England, France, Poland, Romania, and Turkey – be organized. Chamberlain did not deem it appropriate for Romania and Turkey to participate, but accepted Poland. However, Poland itself refused to be included in such an association of states, fearing Germany and also the Soviet Union. Talks between London, Paris, and Moscow continued in April 1939, and Stalin’s emissaries demanded that they be allowed to build a barrier against Germany, which meant recognizing a sphere of influence in a wide area between the Baltic and Black Seas. On May 8, 1939, the Kremlin’s demands were rejected. Until July of that year, talks between the capitals kept going, but Moscow kept asking for security guarantees through access for its troops to the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. Stalin believed that London and Paris would maintain a conciliatory attitude, but when he realized that such a tactic was no longer acceptable in the West, he turned his attention to exploring an agreement with Germany (late May 1939). On August 23, 1939, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed, which also included a “Secret Additional Protocol,” essentially an agreement between Hitler and Stalin on the division of spheres of influence and a “territorial and political rearrangement” in Central and Southeastern Europe (Moscow assumed control of Finland, Estonia and Latvia, as well as the eastern part of Poland and the Bessarabian territory of Romania, while Berlin was to take over Lithuania and the rest of Poland). On May 22, 1939, Germany and Italy formed a military alliance (the “Pact of Steel”), and the next day Hitler informed his army chiefs that Germany would not be able to obtain another Munich, which is why they would have to prepare for war with France and England, and possibly with the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Thus, taking advantage of the inability of the West and other European states to form a coalition to defend the Versailles System, Hitler laid the foundations of the Axis group, through which he sought to establish German hegemony in Europe (the Führer envisioned a “New Order,” obviously dominated by him, with territories conquered and exploited by Germany, ruled by the Nazi military order, terror, and even the extermination of certain peoples), aware that he could only be stopped by the resistance of England and the Soviet Union, whose power could only be amplified by the possible involvement of the United States of America.

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<sup>9</sup> C.E. Black and E.C. Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe: A History*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 531.

<sup>10</sup> Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 534.

At the beginning of World War II, the US resolved not to interfere in the events of the conflagration, maintaining a neutral stance. In November 1939, Congress allowed the sale of arms and ammunition to belligerents. Observing the Battle of Britain, President Roosevelt ordered in June 1940 that several naval arsenal components be shipped to England. In March 1941, the Congress also passed the famous Lend–Lease Act, which authorized the president, in the interests of American security, to make resources available for the defense of other countries. Naturally, England was among the first countries to benefit from the new American legislation, followed by the Soviet Union in November 1941. Assuming the role of “arsenal of democracy,” the United States also prepared militarily, and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (December 1941) were involved effectively in the midst of military operations.

Roosevelt and Churchill met at the first war conference in August 1941. At the end of that meeting, a joint statement entitled the *Atlantic Charter* was released to the public. The eight – point document was addressed to all nations of the world, large and small, victors and vanquished, with the hope of achieving peace without territorial expansion or changes made without the freely expressed will of the peoples concerned, respect for the right of all peoples to choose their form of government, to engage in free trade and cooperation between nations, and free movement on the seas and oceans. The *Charter* concluded by stating that peace was necessary “for all nations of the world,” but that this required that force, threats, and aggression would no longer be used in relations between states. Furthermore, it was considered that a general system of security, as well as practical measures for achieving and maintaining peace among nations, should be established. Henry Kissinger considered that the document issued following the first Roosevelt–Churchill meeting was an attempt to design a post – war security system in “Wilsonian terms” and without a geopolitical component.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, he noted that England had accepted the role of junior partner in the American–British relationship, Churchill realizing the importance of the US entering the war for the new balance of power in the international system. Churchill returned to Washington before the end of 1941 for consultations with President Roosevelt. The ambassadors of the USSR and China also participated in these discussions. The substance of this 2 + 2 dialogue formed the content of the *Declaration by United Nations*, signed by the four states (the “Big Four”) in January 1942. Twenty – two other countries from the Commonwealth, Europe, and Latin America were also co – signatories. The central objective of the United Nations was “complete victory over the enemies,” the defense of “life, liberty, independence, and religious freedom, the preservation of human rights and justice” in the signatory countries and “in other countries.” The governments that issued the Declaration pledged to mobilize all types of resources against the Tripartite Pact

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 391.

and its satellites, to cooperate with each other, and not to conclude separate peace with the enemies.<sup>12</sup> With the inauguration of the United Nations, the signatories agreed to adopt the *Atlantic Charter* as a “common program of purposes and principles,” which meant that the projection of the future postwar international system was still based on the Wilson Doctrine. Following these political and diplomatic initiatives, military cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers also began. In May 1942, Molotov visited London and Washington to request that the Allies open a second front to ease the pressure on the Soviet army. During these discussions, Stalin’s envoy insisted that the United Nations recognize the Soviet annexations after 1939. Roosevelt’s advisors did not agree with this request, arguing that such recognition would weaken the joint war effort and violate the promise that border issues would not be addressed before the end of the war. The intertwining of politics and military affairs continued to give rise to considerable differences, but the military objective of ending the war almost always took precedence over suggestions or decisions to reconfigure the international system. Alongside the doctrine of unconditional surrender, the Allied Powers also agreed on regional control, as a result of their military superiority in advancing against the enemy. It was a *de facto* acceptance of the system of spheres of influence, naturally with the hope that the post – war agreements would confirm *de jure* status. These projections were strongly criticized by allies who saw unconditional surrender as an obstacle to hastening the exit of satellite states from the Axis. But Washington cared deeply about this doctrine, mainly for domestic political reasons. At three conferences of the Allies in 1943–1944, it was implied that if countries such as Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Finland would initiate their withdrawal from the Axis, they could receive more favorable terms. And in the Potsdam Declaration (August 2, 1945), such a promise was made to Japan.

Undoubtedly, the most sensitive discussions among the Allies took place on the subject of opening a second front in Europe. A heated controversy erupted over Churchill’s proposal to launch a campaign in the Balkans. American military commanders did not look favorably on British strategic interests in the Balkans, and the Soviets openly opposed the initiative because they believed that Churchill wanted to prevent a Soviet occupation of southeastern Europe. During the inter – Allied negotiations in Casablanca (January 1943), Washington (May 1943), Quebec (August 1943), and Tehran (November 1943), it was concluded that an Allied landing on the European continent could only be achieved in the spring of 1944. General Eisenhower was appointed Commander – in – Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Force, which was tasked with preparing the aforementioned operation.

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<sup>12</sup> See the text of the United Nations Declaration in Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 887–888.

In order to decipher the meaning of the inter – Allied negotiations during the war years, aimed at reconfiguring the post – war international system, we have resorted to the reconstruction by Black and Helmreich in the cited work, since they were also part of the Roosevelt Administration’s analysis and strategy teams, as experts tasked with creating scenarios for global developments after the end of the conflagration. They pointed out that a coherent US vision for the post – war world did not exist until the end of 1945.<sup>13</sup> The reason may have been that Presidents Roosevelt and Truman were primarily interested in ending military operations in Europe and Asia as quickly as possible because there was impatience within the US for the demobilization of American troops. In the liberated territories, Washington hoped that free elections would be held as soon as possible so that the US would not be responsible for the evolution of those states. England, France, and other Western countries were expected to be able to manage their internal policies and deal with regional situations without American support.

The hesitations of the US and the West were noted by leaders in Moscow, who continued to espouse the same rhetoric and policies as in 1939. Accordingly, they have always presented the security of their country as their primary concern, formulating it in terms specific to Central and Eastern Europe, the Far East, and the Middle East. Convinced that the early post – war years would be marked by internal unrest in most countries emerging from the war, they did not hide their desire to expand communist regimes, especially in neighboring countries which they wanted to be “friendly” to Moscow. It was in this spirit that they approached the Yalta negotiations (February 1945), demanding political control of the territory from northern Greece to the Baltic Sea and Central Europe, i.e. the area under Soviet military control and over which the Western powers had no influence. Ironically, the Big Three also issued the *Declaration of Liberated Europe* in Yalta, suggesting that Central and Eastern European countries should be governed by representative authorities established through free elections. The Yalta Conference was dominated by the Anglo–American spirit of compromise, which focused more on defeating Germany than on the actual status of countries in Central and Southeastern Europe. In August 1945, when Truman and Attlee wanted to reopen discussions on Poland’s borders in Potsdam, Stalin countered with the decisions taken at Yalta and the bilateral Soviet–Polish agreement that was being finalized. And to set up treaties with Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Finland (the former Axis satellites), it was decided in Potsdam that a Council of Foreign Ministers of the Great Powers would negotiate with the governments of those countries. During these negotiations, it became clear that the Great Powers had abandoned even the modest substance of the Yalta Agreement, maintaining only its form as a means of communication for Western public opinion. A division of Europe into regional political, economic, and military blocs took place,<sup>14</sup> accompanied by rivalry and tensions between Western European countries and the Soviet Union.

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<sup>13</sup> Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 604–609.

<sup>14</sup> Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 609.

This was the atmosphere in which, in accordance with the agreements reached in Tehran, the documentary material prepared by the Dumbarton Oaks Conference (August 21–September 28, 1943), which had also been discussed at Yalta, was taken up with a view to organizing the San Francisco Conference (April 1945) to propose the *United Nations Charter* and establish the *United Nations*. The *Charter of the United Nations* was signed on June 26, 1945, establishing several objectives and principles of the UN. These include a commitment to maintaining peace and security, fostering friendly relations between nations, resorting to cooperation to resolve problems, and establishing a decision – making center to harmonize interactions between states. The principle of sovereignty and equality of UN members was established. Only a few references were made to the International Court of Justice, whose role and operating methods were to be established by its own statutes.

Three decades ago, Henry Kissinger’s analysis proposed an explanation for the negotiations to restructure the post – war international system in light of the idiosyncrasies of the three leaders of the United Nations: Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin.<sup>15</sup> The well – known politician and diplomat noted that each of the three leaders mentioned above brought their own national historical experiences to the discussions about the future international order. For example, Churchill was very attached to the British imperial idea and the tactic of balance of power. Roosevelt imagined a world government ruled by the “Four Policemen,” namely the US, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China, a kind of directorate resembling the old European Concert. The American president did not trust the old European diplomatic system, accustomed to power balance maneuvers, which is why he supported collective security based on international cooperation. He overestimated London’s capacity for continental action and often disadvantaged Churchill in his dealings with Stalin, but he also had a manifest reluctance toward France. Stalin’s approach incorporated both communist ideology and traditional Russian politics. His pet project was the creation of a sphere of influence in Central and Southeastern Europe, which he envisioned as a buffer zone where he could organize an advanced defense against a future/probable invasion by Germany or even the West. Roosevelt, a supporter of Wilsonian ideas, encountered a Stalin who was strongly attached to a Realpolitik similar to that of the tsars in the 19th century, which did not prevent him from frequently accepting the solutions proposed by the Kremlin leader. This situation put Churchill on the defensive and prompted him to propose new compromises in bilateral talks with Roosevelt and Stalin. Among these, the attempt to “save Greece” by admitting Soviet predominance in Central and Southeastern Europe (the famous “agreement on percentages” of October 1944, in the Stalin–Churchill dialogue in Moscow) stood out. This even though Churchill was, according to Robert Kaplan, “more

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<sup>15</sup> Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 395.

anti-communist than any other negotiator.”<sup>16</sup> Roosevelt’s preference for “personal diplomacy” was an advantage for Stalin, as it allowed him to take a tough stance by leveraging his military capabilities. Furthermore, at the time of Yalta, the US president was ill and very weak, which allowed Stalin to set himself up as the leader of the political and diplomatic game, without having to make much effort to achieve his goal of controlling Central and Southeastern Europe. In order to convince Stalin to participate in the military campaign in the Far East and to support a new international order, Roosevelt accepted the communist leader’s demand for a sphere of influence in northern China. The US president believed that spheres of influence would no longer be relevant in the future international system, but the dynamics of global political developments proved him wrong. Stalin violated the terms of the *Yalta Declaration* only two months after it was signed, both in the case of Poland and Romania. But Roosevelt was living his last days. He died on April 12, 1945. Truman, the next US president, would quickly realize that the agreements reached by the “Big Three” at the end of the war had caused major problems for the development of the post – war international system.

After the Battle of Stalingrad, the nations and states of Central and Southeastern Europe sought to find a way to associate themselves with the United Nations. They had a premonition that their area would become a source of dispute between the Soviet Union and the Allied Powers, having experienced a series of periods of stability and instability throughout their history.<sup>17</sup> From late 1942 to early 1943, Romanian messengers from the government and the United Opposition began to sound out the diplomatic missions of England and the US regarding a way out of the Axis camp.<sup>18</sup> The doctrine of unconditional surrender greatly delayed the finding of a solution acceptable to these states. Moreover, they were aware that their fate as areas of Soviet influence and the danger of communization would not depend on their will, but on future transformations of the international system.<sup>19</sup> Under Soviet occupation since the second half of 1944, these nations were politically and economically controlled by Kremlin representatives who imposed the pace and methods of their Sovietization even before the signing of the Peace Treaty. With great bitterness, at the beginning of 1947, C. Rădulescu-Motru, professor at the University of Bucharest and member of the Romanian Academy,

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<sup>16</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *Politici de război [Warrior Politics]* (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 31.

<sup>17</sup> István Bibó, *Misère des petits États d’Europe de l’Est* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1986), 208; Recently, the Italian historian Francesco Guida reiterated the subject of the multiple and contradictory experiences that Central–South–Eastern European societies had, especially in the modern and contemporary periods, which did not give them “the necessary time to stabilize,” see Francesco Guida, *Cealaltă jumătate a Europei: De la Primul Război Mondial până în zilele noastre [The Other Half of Europe: From the First World War to the present day]* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2023), 10.

<sup>18</sup> Vasile Pușcaș, *Speranță și disperare: Negocieri Româno–Aliate 1943–1944 [Hope and Despair: Romanian–Allied Negotiations 1943–1944]* (Bucharest: Litera, 1995), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Florin Abraham, *Romania Since the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 21.

wrote in his diary: “We made the mistake of believing that the Russians could become our friends. The Russians are our eternal enemies.”<sup>20</sup> And after the Romanian government signed the Peace Treaty (Paris, February 10, 1947), the same distinguished intellectual from Bucharest lamented the future fate of his country: “I am convinced that Romania’s future is completely compromised by the burdensome clauses of the Peace Treaty.” In a few years, Rădulescu-Motru predicted, Romania would lose what little independence it had left. “My illusions about the intervention of Anglo–American democracy were shattered.”<sup>21</sup>

As was to be expected, the whole world had very high expectations of the reconfiguration of the post – war international system. These resulted not only from memories of the failures of the Versailles System during the interwar period, but above all from fresh images of the unimaginable horrors of the Second World War. In the US and Western Europe, there were insistent calls for the rapid demobilization of troops from conflict areas and for political leaders to build a world in which the use of force would no longer be necessary. Europeans were less optimistic, since, in addition to rebuilding the economy and infrastructure destroyed by the war, there was also a pressing fear of future armed attacks, either from Germany or even from the Soviet Union (the communist threat was also perceived). That is why there was a movement toward American involvement in European reconstruction. The Soviet Union, for its part, frequently invoked fears of the West, so that an atmosphere of hostility soon developed between the former Allies who had just succeeded in ending the war. Moscow assiduously promoted the image of a Soviet Union constantly under threat of invasion by foreigners, with the West portrayed as a potential enemy. In fact, in February 1946, Stalin publicly stated that Western countries were enemies of the USSR.<sup>22</sup> This type of discourse from the Kremlin leader was intended for internal propaganda, seeking to eliminate any trace of social and political instability. However, it should be emphasized that, in Stalin’s strategic thinking, Russia had no adherence to European culture and civilization, as he exalted Russian values and constantly denigrated European ones.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, he pointed out that he clearly perceived the West’s antagonism towards the Soviet Union’s aggressive takeover of the states of Central and Southeastern Europe. And in March 1946, in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill declared with foresight that “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended and divided the continent.” The American and Western European response came only almost a year after Churchill’s speech, taking the form of the Truman Doctrine, which announced the West’s decision to

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<sup>20</sup> Constantin Rădulescu-Motru, *Revizuire și adăugiri 1947 [Revisions and additions 1947]* (Bucharest: Floarea Darurilor, 1998), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Rădulescu-Motru, *Revizuire și adăugiri*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 632.

<sup>23</sup> Edwina Moreton and Gerald Segal, eds., *Soviet Strategy Toward Western Europe* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 23.

oppose Stalin and the aggressions of the USSR. And Churchill was probably right when he said in 1948 that only the fear of the atomic bomb saved Europe from complete subjugation by communism. Such attitudes paved the way for the creation of post – war organizations such as NATO, COMECON, and the Warsaw Pact, which had to reconcile their *raison d’être* with the Charter of the United Nations and the UN.

Historians after 1945 were also influenced by the East–West antagonism that followed the end of World War II. Post – war historiographical analyses have been unable to avoid drawing parallels and differences between the last war and the First World War, noting that between 1939 and 1945 a “total war” was waged<sup>24</sup> that created a major fracture in human society, inevitably leading to a new international order. Following this global conflagration, not only was Britain dethroned from its status as a Great Power, but Europe also lost its primacy on the international stage.<sup>25</sup> We cannot speak of discontinuities only in negative terms. Western Europe has risen like a phoenix<sup>26</sup> from the ashes and begun a process of reconstruction based on European solidarity, even discussing a federalist formula for a “European people” within a “united Europe.”<sup>27</sup> Tony Judt<sup>28</sup> and W.M. Spellman<sup>29</sup> drew attention to the fact that, after the start of the Cold War, Western historians narrated World War II through sequences that included Western states, often confusing Europe with Western Europe, while Soviet historians glorified the bravery of the Soviet army, which had given itself the title of “liberator” for Central and Southeastern Europe. Beyond the asymmetries revealed by such a historiographical approach, a characteristic of the post – war international system was also revealed, namely the existence of two sub – systems of globality, shaped by the Great Power politics of the two superpowers—the US and the USSR—which monitored their interactions through the lens of military and, above all, nuclear power balance. Therefore, although Wilsonian principles seemed to play a major role in the reconfiguration of the international system at the beginning of the United Nations Coalition, especially through President Roosevelt’s conception, at the end of the war, Great Power politics reemerged and the balance of power was used to maintain collective security, which was the objective of the newly launched international institutions in international politics.

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<sup>24</sup> Versailles, *Penser le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and André Kaspi, *Histoire des relations internationales de 1945 à nos jours* [*History of International Relations from 1945 to the Present Day*] (Paris: Armand Colin, 2001), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Keith Lowe, *Continutul barbar. Europa și urmările celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial* [*Savage Continent. Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*] (Bucharest: Kronica, 2019), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Versailles, *Penser le XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Judt, *Epoca postbelică. O istorie a Europei de după 1945* [*Postwar. A History of Europe Since 1945*] (Iași: Polirom, 2019), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Spellman, *A Concise History of the World Since 1945*, 4.

What was called *Pax Americana* did not refer only to the way the US managed its post – war spheres of influence, but also to the way Washington interacted with the other power zone (the USSR), with the new post – colonial independent states, and with the “non – aligned” countries. That is why some historians of the postwar period have tended to believe that the United States aspired to global hegemony, with only the Soviet Union standing in the way of this aspiration.<sup>30</sup> In fact, it is historically established that the Soviet Union also took all kinds of measures to expand its global domination. Even the Helsinki Final Act (1975) was interpreted by the Kremlin as a context for international relations in which the “balance of power between socialist and communist states” was expressed.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the international system of bipolarity consisted of a continuous confrontation (even in the so – called stage of “coexistence”) between the two worlds – the capitalist and the capitalist – of course with very different intensities and forms, until 1991. Hans Morgenthau, who was involved in the US government since the end of World War II and followed the evolution of the post – war international system for more than two decades, argued that the end of military warfare (1945) was the beginning of another type of war – the “political war” or “psychological warfare”<sup>32</sup> – between the US and the USSR. This was a consequence of the structural change in the operating balance of power in the new international system dominated by two superpowers. Again after 1945, it became apparent that the power difference between the two superpowers and the minor powers was so great that it led to the latter becoming “satellites” (blocs), having to behave either as open supporters of the superpowers or as more or less disciplined subordinates. This bipolar system created a certain inflexibility in the balance of power, with both superpowers being careful not to allow a third power to emerge, which would have taken on the role of stabilizer, guardian of the global balance of power. De Gaulle suggested, for example, that a united Europe should position itself as a “third superpower,” which caused anxiety in both Washington and Moscow. It appears that the bipolar system saw the formation of two blocs that balanced the power (by including or excluding someone from the bloc, generally from the non – aligned camp), and crises in the system could arise either as a result of centrifugal forces within the blocs or through the emergence of new centers of power (from within or outside) that would disrupt the bipolar balance of power.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Layne, *Pacea iluziilor. Marea strategie americană din 1940 până în prezent* [*The Peace of Illusions. American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*] (Iași: Polirom, 2011), 109.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Moreton and Segal, *Soviet Strategy*, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politica între națiuni* [*Politics among nations*] (Iași: Polirom, 2007), 360. Recently, Tim Weiner has taken up the theme of post-war political warfare, defining it as follows: “Political warfare is the way in which nations project their power and act against the enemy, except for launching projectiles and sending troops,” see Tim Weiner, *Nebunie și glorie. America, Rusia și războiul politic 1945–2020* [*The Folly and the Glory. America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945–2020*] (Bucharest: Litera, 2021), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Morgenthau, *Politica între națiuni*, 380; see also John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 81.

A reconfiguration of the international system can be achieved by the freely consented action of its members, which is somewhat of an ideal. The international system is most often changed by a “transformative war,” as Kenneth Waltz calls it. Waltz. The Second World War had as one of its objectives to change the international system and ended by transforming the interwar system into an international system of bipolarism. For the management of international politics in such a system, the size and quality of power were essential. It was power that provided the state with the tools to exercise autonomy and gave it the means to deal with threats from other actors; power enabled an actor to act in as broad a space as possible; power also ensured a higher degree of security in interactions with other power holders; power paved the way for favorable positioning within the system and support in securing one’s own interests.<sup>34</sup> Equally significant is the observation that political leaders during the Cold War, including those in the West, adopted Machiavellianism as a method of governing the international system.<sup>35</sup> This does not mean that the lessons of the bipolar international order established after World War II were immutable and could not be improved or changed. For instance, the theme of world reordering preoccupied the Kennedy and Johnson presidential administrations, as it had been recognized that the *Arrogance of Power* (the title of a book by Senator Fulbright) could lead to the destruction of the world. In that context, the advantages of an “American–European union” were also discussed.<sup>36</sup> However, American leaders also assumed that a tripolar world could generate more instability, which led them to abandon the idea of changing the post – war international system, preferring to maintain and manage the bipolar balance of power. It was considered that, since the 1970s, the United States and the Soviet Union had reached the maturity of bipolarity, so that the objective of the following period should be the preservation of the post – war international system. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the distribution of power in the international system changed, and the world moved from bipolarism to the so – called unipolar international order.<sup>37</sup> It has been said that the international system created after World War II has exhausted its resources, giving rise to the “theory of hegemonic stability” managed by the “benevolent hegemon” – the United States of America. Washington proclaimed American victory in the Cold War, the elimination of the communist threat, and celebrated the “triumph of the neoliberal order.”<sup>38</sup> Following 2001, Washington increasingly advocated unilateralism, which generated a series of challenges, particularly from Russia and China, who sought a

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<sup>34</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Teoria politicii internaționale [Theory of International Politics]* (Iași: Polirom, 2006), 261–262.

<sup>35</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 269.

<sup>37</sup> Duroselle and Kaspi, *Histoire des relations internationales*, 408.

<sup>38</sup> Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 12.

new configuration of the international system based on multilateralism among the Great Powers.<sup>39</sup> The competition that began in the early 2000s did not maintain the formula for cooperation for long. And the crises generated by the existing system intensified from 2004 onwards, leading Moscow to openly attack the post–Cold War order at the beginning of 2022 and start the war with Ukraine, which marks a new episode of confrontation between the Great Powers for the reconfiguration of the contemporary international system.

It is not our intention to offer lessons from the historiographical narrative we have presented. That is why we will limit ourselves to setting out a few predictive conclusions, since, as we have shown in our concluding remarks, there is a clear correlation between the international system established at the end of the Second World War and the current efforts to reshape the world order. Firstly, we emphasize that the 20th century has demonstrated that the international system itself is an important actor in international relations and politics, requiring the full attention of state, corporate, and other organizations in their studies and governance practices. Even the post – war system of bipolarity showed its need to be adjusted to international sensitivities two decades after its official inception. This was due both to the speed of change in international society and to the diversification of the actors operating within the system (e.g., large corporations), as well as to increasingly intense and complex global interdependencies. Which would justify our assertion that the international system needs constant adaptation to international realities. Personally, I do not believe that a restructuring of the international system can be achieved solely through a “transformative war,” as practiced nowadays. Experiences from the outbreak of the two major world wars in the past century show that their origins lie in misunderstanding and a lack of willingness to negotiate and adapt the characteristics of the international system to the needs of the time. We insist on international negotiations because, at the end of a conflict, the parties involved always resort to this method to harmonize their interests at the systemic level. Then why not always use negotiations, integrative ones as far as possible, so as not to resort to “transformative wars” which, however they may be classified, have been and continue to be destructive forms of interaction? Perhaps we can find the answer in Appian, MacMillan, or Kissinger, who insisted on the idiosyncratic aspects of political and military leaders. And some explanations also lie in the quality of leadership of the Great Powers. For the leaders of the Great Powers generally prefer the game of power balance and express their pride as victors and hegemon, being quite capable of sacrificing the good of the world to highlight their importance within the system. This is probably why the UN and the Security Council have failed to reform and adapt to the post–Cold War era, as the Great Powers, formally recognized even by the UN Charter, were reluctant to reconfigure the system built at the end of World War II around

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 198.

this global institution, where international law was the basis for the interaction of all categories of actors in international relations. And we could draw another conclusion: the history of the last two centuries has shown that most leaders of the Great Powers have preferred an international system in which they could display their power through global competition, such as the European Concert of the 19th century. However, history has shown that such practices were instrumental in triggering the two world wars of the first half of the last century. Who could believe that such disastrous effects for all of humanity would not follow future actions by the Great Powers that support and direct a global Concert or Directorial system?

The history of the international system in the 20th century and the first decades of our century has provided us with a variety of conclusions that can help us understand the world we live in and, above all, encourage rational attitudes among all categories of actors in international relations. The experiences of the evolution of the Versailles System and the International System that emerged in the context of the Second World War have particular consequences for today's international society and will affect our future developments, including at the individual level. That is why recollections of events related to the topic under discussion are welcome, but I believe they should be accompanied by an in – depth public debate, not just an academic one, on their consequences and possible ways forward.