

## Are Pre-Second World War Writings on International Politics Still Relevant?

Written by Flamur Krasniqi

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/12/03/are-pre-second-world-war-writings-on-international-politics-still-relevant/>

FLAMUR KRASNIQI, DEC 3 2016

The *Twenty Years' Crisis (TYC)* (1939) by E.H. Carr and *The Three Guineas (TTG)* by Virginia Woolf are seminal texts in the study of international relations, but their relevance in understanding international politics (IP) today is constantly being called into question. For instance, only thirty years after its publication, Hedley Bull argued that the stream of thinking associated with understanding IP created by *TYC* "has run its course" (1969: 633). Similarly, immediately following its publication, critics such as Q.D. Leavis argued *TTG* was not an explanation of the contemporary world (1938: 205). Despite Leavis' known anti-feminist views, her criticism was shared by many non-anti-feminist academics; Cecil Day-Lewis argued that Woolf's isolationist stance was illogical (1938). Yet, certain events in contemporary international affairs can be explained by these texts, such as Carr's assertion that the concept of state sovereignty was becoming more blurred, is profound. For instance, ever-growing regional integration under the European Union is transferring normally associated state competences, such as border harmonisation and custom tariffs, from national parliaments to supranational institutions (Moravcsik, 1997). The same is also true in regards to *TTG*. Woolf's argument that in order to defeat fascism abroad one must first defeat it at home is increasingly becoming a popular argument in the U.S. following the election of Donald Trump as President. While Trump is no Hitler, Klaas (2016) argues that the xenophobic rhetoric by Trump defeats the credibility of the U.S.' continued advocacy for the need to defeat growing right-wing populism in Europe, something Woolf in later writings termed "subconscious Hitlerism" (1969: 174).

However, on the whole, the paper argues that Carr and Woolf's writings struggle to explain contemporary IP. The paper first puts forth two arguments why *TTG* is not relevant to IP in the present day. Firstly, Woolf's account for the causes and reasons of war completely neglects the international paradigm of politics. As Peter Wilson argued, Woolf's book is entirely focused on the internal constitutional influence of the state (2009). The failure to take into account anarchical influences of the international system is not an accurate depiction of the ever globalizing IP of today (Held and McGrew, 2003). Secondly, allied with the abovementioned, Woolf's argument that war is exclusively a male activity is not in line with contemporary studies of IP, as not only is there a growing role for women in war, but this implies the notion that men like war or at least attain some form of satisfaction from it. Here, Woolf failed to understand the devastating nature of war, which in the late 1930s was still carried out by conventional means, i.e. through battle groups. Today, owing to advances in military combat technology, such as thermo-nuclear technology, the consequences of warfare are far more devastating, which means *TTG* is even further removed from understanding IP in the twenty-first century than it was in the 1930s. The paper then proceeds to outline three arguments analysing why the *TYC* also struggles to explain contemporary IP. Firstly, Carr's argument of "the final and irrevocable breakdown of the conditions that made the nineteenth century order possible" (1938: 100) was overstated. Today, the world economic order still follows a *laissez-faire* system of governance under the World Trade Organisation and more liberal democratic projects, such as the European Union (EU) and Association of South-Eastern Asian Nations (ASEAN), exist than ever. Secondly, Carr's position that the morality of a state in relation to international law, peace and order, what he termed as the 'Haves' and 'Have Nots' is so loosely defined, if at all (Guzzini, 2001), that such ambiguous interpretations renders *TYC* irrelevant to understanding present day IP. Lastly, and perhaps even more problematic is Carr's claim that morality holds no independent value in a states' international output. The paper argues that this is not an accurate depiction of today's IP, as different socio-political and religious moral beliefs play a significant role in a states' international affairs.

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In *TTG*, Woolf's main argument is that in order to defeat fascism abroad, [British] society needed to first defeat fascism at home (1938: 121). Woolf maintains that 'fascism at home' persists because the social fabric of society is dominated by men, and therefore to overcome this, the creation of an outsider's society, what she terms 'precession', of civil non-involvement is required. To enforce her standpoint, Woolf provides the example of the British Parliament voting a £300M armaments budget in 1937 as proof that a male-dominated society is a society susceptible to warmongering. Despite the problem that she accuses men as finding satisfaction in war, which is a separate point further discussed below, Woolf completely dismisses the influence of the international system on a states' behaviour. In fact, there is no mention of important international factors such as the idea of collective security. In an ever-increasing globalised world, where the international system and its primary units (states) are subject to the "strengthening, widening and deepening of interdependence" (Held and McGrew, 2003: 73), such an account cannot be relevant to the IP of today. As with the 1937 British Parliamentary vote, today the idea of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is perceived by some states, notably Russia, as an aggressive institution no longer required in a post-Cold War international whose existence only serves as a tool for Western expansionism (Financial Times, 2016). Yet, without NATO the security of many Eastern European states is not guaranteed (Obama, 2016). NATO may be considered a warmongering project when it convenes Putin or other political opponents of Washington, but the organisation's existence is a defence mechanism for many otherwise defenceless states. In conjunction to this point, Woolf also fails to understand the concept of deterrence. While in 1937, many politicians, in particular Winston Churchill, were considered warmongers (BBC, 2005), the Parliamentary vote in favour of rearmament, however unpopular, was aimed at deterring Hitler's growing expansionist tendencies. Similarly today, NATO's existence also acts as a deterrent to possible Russian expansions in Eastern Europe. Thus, Woolf's position regarding the 'patriarchal social fabric of society' being susceptible to war, which completely dismisses the influence of international factors such as collective security, is not relevant to IP today. Also, Woolf's argument is built on the absence of important concepts, such as deterrence, which in the present day play a strong role in IP.

Secondly, and related to the above mentioned, Woolf's argument that war is exclusively a male activity is strongly disputable in today's IP. Firstly, there is a growing role for women in war, not least on the front-lines but also in positions of power and authority that may be in charge of deciding when a state goes to war. For instance, in 2015, German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, introduced a bill in the *Bundestag* for possible German military action in Syria. While the Upper House is comprised of a majority of male politicians, Merkel was individually responsible for the introduction of the bill that eventually passed (Daily Mail, 2015). Thus, defeating the notion that war is an exclusive male conduct. Also, and perhaps even more worrying, is the overarching insinuation that comes with Woolf's argument that war is only a male characteristic: the idea that perhaps men like war (Wilson, 2009). Two problems arise from such an assumption. Firstly, Woolf's failure to account for the devastating consequences that arise from war. Again, due to globalisation, advances in military technology, have transformed the conduction of war. The level of devastation that can, and indeed does, result from modern warfare, such as thermo-nuclear attack, are not compatible to understand today's IP. This is evidenced by the conduction of various non-nuclear proliferation treaties between the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. More recently, the Iran Nuclear Deal (2015), whereby France, China, Russia, the United Kingdom and the U.S. attempted to limit nations with nuclear capabilities on the premise that the more states that possess such capabilities, the less the possibility of a 'nuclear war' (Kerry, 2016). The second problem with Woolf's argument of war being a male characteristic, is that she inadvertently dismisses the different types of war, effectively neglecting decades and even centuries worth of scholarship, not least the 'Just War Theory' which dates back to St. Thomas Aquinas. This is not only an irrelevant in understanding present day IP, but it was also an irrelevant account of IP during the 1930s. The ongoing Syrian Civil war provides the best case example of Woolf's inaccurate account. A U.S. led air-coalition which is targeting Islamic State militants as part of the going 'Global War on Terror', is not identical to Russia's targeting of Syrian opposition groups in an attempt to preserve Russian influence in the Middle-East. The former, ideally through contested methods of combat (drone-warfare) is deemed as a justified war, while the other, which is increasingly targeting innocent civilians is not (MSF, 2016; UNHCR, 2016). Equally, Britain and France's declaration of war on Nazi Germany in 1939 cannot be seen in the same light as Nazi Germany's declaration of war on the Soviet Union in 1941, or even Hitler's declaration of war against the U.S. on 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1941.

Moving on to *TYC*, for Carr the 'overall crisis' was that the pre-1914 world order based on liberal democratic material conditions such as *laissez-faire* economics and free trade, had collapsed. Instead, the coming post-1939

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international order was to be marked by Socialist, and even Nazi, revolutions, for which Carr argued the former was the pioneer of the future (Morgenthau, 1948). Such depiction is not relevant to today's IP as Fascism was defeated in 1945 and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed in 1991, and with it hopes of a Socialist utopia. However, ending the argument here would not be intellectually prudent, thus further analysis is required. Ideally, the focus needs to be on China, which aside from Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam, remains the only Communist state in existence. Nevertheless, even China, since the 1980s following Deng Xiaoping's leadership has increasingly moved away from core socialist values, such as a dominated state economy and agriculture, to a more semi-open capitalist-run economy (Mingwei, 2010). In addition, China has also moved away from a single labour union style domestic policy, contrary to Carr's assertion that the future will be marked by 'mass unions' (1939: 122). Furthermore, Carr's the new age will be marked by the death of conditions (liberal democracy) is also irrelevant to present day IP. Since the time of *TYC*, there has been a double increase in the amount of democracies in the world (Global Democracy Ranking, 2015; Freedom House Index, 2016). Additionally, the world has seen the rise of liberal democratic projects such as the EU and ASEAN. Interestingly, many of the new democracies that have emerged also dispute one of Carr's other claims that small states will cease to exist. Small-state proliferation has also strongly increased by almost triple since the end of the Second World War (Global Democracy Ranking, 2015). As such, the assertion that the post-1939, composed of Socialist and Nazi revolutions, was to replace the pre-1913 order of liberal democratic values is not relevant to today's IP.

Carr also argued law, order and peace are products of the satisfied powers as a means of preserving the status-quo, or rather preserving the international balance-of-power in favour of the satisfied powers. Meanwhile, the language of fairness and justice are products of the unsatisfied powers, seeking to increase their power and role within the international system (1938). Here, Carr failed to distinguish who or what, or under what conditions, a state is to be considered a 'Have' or a 'Have Not' power. As Wilson (2009) argues, Carr's failure to provide insight as to how one judges the difference between 'Haves' and 'Have Nots' is perplexing in understanding IP at any time. Wilson (2009) illustrates the problems created by such ambiguity stemming from Carr's failure to distinguish criteria for analysis, by arguing that Nazi Germany could really be considered a 'Have Not' power in the late 1930s following Hitler's diplomatic victories, such as reoccupation of the Rhineland, Anschluss and the Munich Agreement. Seemingly, the ambiguity of these terms also persists today with many rising powers, in particular China which is labelled as a 'Have Not' power (Shambaugh, 2014; Thompson, 2014). Yet, China is the second largest economy and has the largest standing army on the globe. In 2015, the Renminbi became an international reserve currency, joining an elite list of countries (International Monetary Fund, 2015). Furthermore, China's economic power, despite what some political analysts argue is due to military prowess, enables Beijing to pressure neighbouring states to its own political will. We see this with the ongoing South China Sea dispute, where following threats of economic embargo, Malaysia and the Philippines have taken a more relaxed approach to Beijing's territorial-maritime claims, even following a United Nations arbitration court ruling Beijing's actions illegal (The Economist, 2016; United Nations, 2016). So, Carr's failure to distinguish what constitutes a 'Have' from a 'Have Not' power, which leaves room for misinterpretation and in some cases political manipulation as in the case of Hitler, is not relevant to today's IP.

Lastly, Carr's 'balance-of-power' argument that only expediency is important to states, and morality has little standing (1939: 113), is problematic. Despite the staunchest neo-realist supporter, such an understanding of IP cannot be right, as this implicitly implies that all states are bound by the common pursuit of power, despite domestic social constructs, which simply is not true (Morgenthau, 1948; Wilson, 2013). Even no one liberal democracy in the world is the same. Nonetheless, presuming that domestic political construction bears no relevance, perhaps even more worrying is that Carr failed to once contemplate the importance of religious morality in a states' international dealings. In the present day, Seton-Watson's argument stands true, perhaps less regarding the role of the Church in Western states, particularly in the U.S. which specifically pursues a domestic policy of 'separation of state and church' but the same cannot be said for states that practice Islam. Especially concerning is certain states' governance structures that adhere to teachings of Islam, such as Saudi Arabia whose constitution is based on the Qur'an. In 2016, a Freedom House Index report pertaining the funding of Saudi headed religious schools, both inside and outside the Kingdom, held that strict conservative interpretations of Islam that fell in line with "the Wahhabi sect of Islam that is the foundation of the Saudi state's political ideology" were being outsourced (Freedom House, 2016). This is made further apparent when analysing the ongoing proxy wars in Syria and Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose relations are shaped by contrasting interpretations of Islam, resulting in Riyadh and Tehran supporting opposing

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forces in both conflicts. Therefore, as Seton-Watson proclaimed: Carr's inability to consider the importance of [Christian] religious ethics is "simply farcical" in understanding IP (Seton-Watson quoted in Cox, 2000: 177). Equally, the importance of (Islamic) religious ethics in today's IP nullifies the *TYC*'s relevance to today's IP.

In conclusion, while *TYC* and *TTG* are considered seminal texts in the study of international relations, their relevance to understanding IP in the present day is hindered by numerous factors. Firstly, both *TYC* and *TTG*, have certain loosely defined or ill developed terms that leave room for misinterpretation, such as the 'Have' and 'Have Not' powers in the *TYC* and the idea that war is an exclusive male trait in the *TTG*. Individually, they also suffer from ill-considered concepts that in fact prove to play a significant role in the understanding of contemporary IP. For instance, the *TYC* fails to understand the relevance of morality in a states' international affairs, as exemplified by the Saudi-Iran relations example. Similarly, *TTG*'s exclusive focus on domestic politics also renders it irrelevant to IP in the present day which owing to globalisation, is increasingly influenced by international factors. As such, the paper has showcased how neither pre-Second World War writings are relevant to IP in the present-day.

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*Date written: November 2016*