
World War II and Modern Meanings

If, as Warren Kimball argues, U.S. diplomatic historians have been obsessed with the Cold War, that is not surprising. Competition with the Soviet Union defined U.S. politics, economy, and culture for a half a century to a far greater degree than for most of the NATO alliance. Outside the United States, however, World War II has not been marginalized from the agenda of history or politics. That is partly because writing about the conflict has been enriched by new subdisciplines of history, as the profession has spread beyond its traditional politicoeconomic base in the last few decades. In addition, the end of the Cold War has opened up new sources and new perspectives to illuminate World War II. As the Cold War recedes into history, so World War II assumes different meanings. In what follows, I shall develop these themes before returning to the question of why, assuming Warren Kimball is right, World War II has been neglected by scholars in the United States.

My first theme concerns change in the disciplinary scope of World War II studies. This reflects the general credibility problem of diplomatic history in a profession that has become infatuated by social and cultural history. It is consequently not remarkable that one of the liveliest areas of debate for diplomatic historians of World War II in the 1990s has been Nazi genocide. Was there an explicit decision to attempt a “Final Solution” of the “Jewish Question”? If so, who took it and when? The debate between “intentionalists,” who pointed to a grand design by Hitler, and “structuralists” who saw the “Final Solution” growing out of the administrative confusions of running a vast European empire had become rather sterile by the 1980s. This debate has now been invigorated by the opening of archives in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states. The new documents fill gaps in the decision-making process in the critical months of the summer and autumn of 1941. They also make it possible to correlate strategic decisions about the war in Russia with the evolving plans for dealing with the Jews. Was the “Final Solution” mounted by Hitler in July amid the euphoria of an expected imminent victory? Or should it be understood as the grim autumn response to the prospect of a long Russian war or as the winter reaction to a global conflict involving the United States? Much turns on the interpretation of individual documents in the manner of classic diplomatic history. But this passionate, sometimes myopic, debate about

*I am grateful to Odd Arne Westad for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

“top-down” decisions is given depth and meaning because it relates directly to the “bottom-up” social history of the Final Solution, especially the question of how “ordinary men” could become “willing executioners” – to borrow the titles of two major books. Do the answers lie in German political culture or should they be found in the bestialization of total war on the Eastern Front? The new wave of works on the Holocaust offers a case study in the creative fusion of diplomatic, strategic, and social history.¹

More generally, the human experience of this epic global war has provided fertile soil for the crossbreeding of international and social history. Christopher Thorne’s investigation of states and societies in *The Far Eastern War* (1985) was a pioneering effort. During the 1990s the social history of soldiering has received particular attention, with studies of Hitler’s army in Russia, American GIs in Britain and continental Europe, and Russian soldiers in postwar Germany. More eclectically, a collection of conference papers has explored the soldier’s experience of war in the West from a variety of national standpoints.²

This “new military history” traces the implementation of grand strategy at the level of daily life. It also breaks open what sometimes seem watertight compartments in much historical writing between periods of “war” and “peace.” As Omer Bartov has observed of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*:

while social historians have probed into civilian society, military historians have concerned themselves with tactics, strategy, and generals. . . . Consequently, once conscripted, the social historians’ protagonists were passed over to the military historians who . . . treated them as part of a vast, faceless mass of field-grey uniforms devoid of any civilian past. Conversely, once the war was over, those soldiers who survived it were, so to speak, delivered back into the hands of the social historians, only to continue their civilian existence with very little reference to the fact that for years they had served as soldiers.³

For the most part, Bartov’s invitation to fill in the “missing years” has not yet been taken up. Accounts of the German army in the east are more concerned

1. For background see David Caeserani, ed., *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (London, 1994); Philippe Burrin, *Hitler and the Jews: The Genesis of the Holocaust* (London, 1994); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996).

2. Christopher Thorne, *The Far Eastern War: States and Societies, 1941–1945* (London, 1985); Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991); David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1941–1945* (New York, 1995); Peter Schrijvers, *The Crash of Ruin: American Combat Soldiers in Europe during World War II* (London, 1998); Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), esp. chaps. 1–2; Paul Addison and Angus Calder, eds., *Time to Kill: The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West, 1939–1945* (London, 1997).

3. Omer Bartov, “The Missing Years: German Workers, German Soldiers,” *German History* 8 (February 1990): 52.

with the way it waged war in 1941–1945 than with the impact of warmaking (and subsequent incarceration in the Soviet Union) on soldiers' postwar attitudes and conduct. This is surprising given the determination of German historians to break away from the idea that 1945 was “year zero” – a new start marked by Nazi defeat and Allied occupation. They are now exploring the roots of postwar, democratic West Germany in wartime developments such as the mobilization of the population for total war from 1942, the erosion of the “Hitler myth” after Stalingrad, and the mass flight of Germans from the eastern territories in 1944–45.⁴ The effects of military service must be part of that story.

The same holds true for the United States. Recent evocations of the wartime experiences of GI Joe have not been complemented by detailed studies of what happened to him when he returned to civilian life. If, as Morton Sosna has estimated, at least half of those serving in the U.S. forces during World War II spent time at a southern base and only one-quarter of these were southerners, then up to six million non-southerners may have crossed the Mason-Dixon line for the first time during the war. What effects did this have on their attitudes and on the south? There is also the impact of military service overseas. Some 4.3 million U.S. soldiers and airmen served in Western Europe during the war, nearly 3 million of them passing through Britain.⁵ Did that experience make them feel more American, more conscious of what they had in common with other GIs who, back home, would have seemed alien on grounds of region or ethnicity? What of the impact of the war on race relations? Some black GIs returning to Dixie had been aroused by their treatment in countries that lacked an overt color bar. Often dressed in uniform, they were in the forefront of voter registration drives in states such as Mississippi. Although this surge of political radicalism fell victim to McCarthyism, John Modell has suggested that the urge for a better society was channeled into economic advancement. The emerging black middle class was a precondition of the civil rights activism of the 1960s; often its offspring took the lead in sit-ins and marches. Yet these are hypotheses. The effects of wartime service on U.S. regionalism, nationalism, and black consciousness all require closer scrutiny.⁶

At its interface with social change, the diplomatic history of World War II is therefore swelling rather than shrinking. It has also been expanding in a

4. See the essays in Martin Broszat, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, and Hans Woller, eds, *Von Stalingrad zum Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* [From Stalingrad to currency reform: On the social history of the upheaval in Germany] (Munich, 1988).

5. Transportation Corps Progress Report, 30 September 1945, in U.S. Army, European Theater of Operations, Record Group 332, ETO Administrative History File 451, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

6. Reynolds, *Rich Relations*, 84–86, 439–45, 492 note 32; Morton Sosna, “The GIs’ South and North-South Dialogue during World War II,” in *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society*, ed. Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler, Jr. (New York, 1988), 311–25; John Modell, Marc Goulden, and Sigurdur Magnusson, “World War Two in the Lives of Black Americans: Some Findings and an Interpretation,” *Journal of American History* 76 (December 1989): 838–48.

different direction to fill a critical “missing dimension,” namely intelligence.⁷ This has been made possible in part by the opening of new archives – the MAGIC and ULTRA decrypts of Axis signals whose existence had been carefully concealed, particularly in British accounts of the war, until the mid-1970s. With the aid of these files, key strategic and operational decisions have gradually been reinterpreted, making triumphs such as El Alamein or the D-Day deception program more comprehensible and perhaps less impressive. Cooperation between the intelligence services of the United States, Britain, and the British Dominions is now well documented, though the Axis side of intelligence history has been less thoroughly explored.⁸

Equally important have been the materials made available (selectively) from Soviet archives, which reveal the extent of Soviet penetration of the higher reaches of policymaking in London and Washington. On the British side, the exploits of Donald Maclean of the Foreign Office, Kim Philby from the security services, and John Cairncross in intelligence are now well documented. But Washington also looks very leaky. Alger Hiss of the State Department, Harry Dexter White of the Treasury, and Lauchlin Currie in the White House have been identified (though not without controversy) as Soviet agents. There has been discussion of whether Harry Hopkins, FDR’s confidant, passed on selected secret material to Soviet officials in an effort to convince Stalin of American goodwill. From the Russian side come claims that, for example, all the private conversations between Roosevelt and Churchill at Tehran and Yalta were bugged by Soviet intelligence. The new intelligence literature has profound implications for diplomatic history. It will be hard to write persuasively about wartime summitry until we have established the extent to which Stalin knew the cards held by Roosevelt and Churchill before they played their hands at the conference table.⁹

There remains, however, real doubt as to how far Stalin trusted this material. By October 1943 Moscow Centre was convinced that its star British informants

7. The phrase is that of Sir Alexander Cadogan, permanent undersecretary of the British Foreign Office during World War II, which was popularized as the title of a collection of essays edited by Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, *The Missing Dimension: Government and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1984).

8. On the British side the classic work is the four-volume official history of *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, under the principal authorship of F. H. Hinsley (London, 1979–90). For operations see the studies by Ralph Bennett, *Ultra in the West: The Normandy Campaign of 1944–45* (London, 1979) and *Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy, 1941–1945* (London, 1989). On inter-Allied cooperation see especially Bradley Smith, *The Ultra-Magic Deals and the Most Secret Special Relationship, 1940–1946* (Novato, CA, 1992) and *Sharing Secrets with Stalin: How the Allies Traded Intelligence, 1941–1945* (Lawrence, KS, 1996). The leading journal is *Intelligence and National Security*, founded in 1985.

9. Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 23–24. See generally Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (London, 1990), chaps. 6–9; Allan Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America – The Stalin Era* (New York, 1999); Eduard Mark, “Venona’s Source 19 and the ‘Trident’ Conference of May 1943: Diplomacy or Espionage?” *Intelligence and National Security* 12 (Summer 1998): 1–31.

were, in fact, double agents. Ironically, the very richness of the material had aroused Soviet suspicions that they were being fed disinformation.¹⁰ This reminds us of an essential truism, that intelligence is about perceptions as much as information: what is gathered must be evaluated. There is now, for instance, no doubt about the numerous warnings Stalin received, from his own agencies and from London and Washington, concerning the German buildup on his borders during the spring of 1941. What mattered far more were the presuppositions against which he assessed that material, presuppositions that in turn shaped the way that timorous subordinates packaged the “raw” data in the first place. Stalin’s basic assumption was that Hitler would never invade the Soviet Union while still at war with Britain. Even then, he assumed, an attack would only follow a long diplomatic war of nerves akin to those over Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1938–39. Stalin, it seems, was more fearful of being provoked into war by British intelligence than he was of being attacked out of the blue by Nazi Germany.¹¹

The Soviet dictator was an extreme case, but by no means unique. Churchill’s aversion to a cross-Channel attack was partly justified by his hope that Germany would suddenly collapse from within, as in 1918. This slanted his reading of intelligence until the end of 1943. The collapse of 1918 had started among Germany’s Balkan allies – a consideration that probably encouraged Churchill’s Mediterranean strategy in World War II.¹² Roosevelt was similarly prone to fitting information into preconceived categories. Rebutting William C. Bullitt’s warnings in 1942–43 of Stalin’s expansionism, FDR responded, according to Bullitt: “I don’t dispute your facts. I don’t dispute the logic of your reasoning. I just have a hunch that Stalin is not that kind of man.”¹³ Whether or not he used those exact words, they indicate his general disposition. Often such hunches reflect deeper assumptions about how a foreign country operates, about whether it is alien or congenial, that shape specific policy decisions.

At this point, intelligence history merges into the broader history of cultural perceptions that, in different ways, Akira Iriye and John Dower have pioneered in studies of the Pacific War. American underestimation of Japan before Pearl Harbor, like Hitler’s derisory assessment of the war potential of the United

10. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London, 1999), chaps. 6–7.

11. John Erickson and David Dilks, eds., *Barbarossa: The Axis and the Allies* (Edinburgh, 1994), chap. 4; Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, 1999), 130–36, 221–26, 279, 319–23.

12. For fuller discussion and evidence see David Reynolds, “Churchill the Appeaser? Between Hitler, Roosevelt, and Stalin in World War II,” in *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950*, ed. Michael Dockrill and Brian McKercher (Cambridge, England, 1996), chap. 9, esp. 213–19.

13. Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York, 1972), 64.

States, owed much to underlying cultural and racial stereotypes.¹⁴ Similarly, Churchill's belief that the Japanese would be merely "the Wops of the Pacific" helps explain why he paid relatively little attention to Britain's strategic dispositions in Southeast Asia until it was too late to save Singapore from humiliating surrender.¹⁵ Cultural history is, of course, one of the other growth areas of the historical profession in recent years. And critics of "narrow" diplomatic history have argued that a new attentiveness to culture and mentalities is one of the most important ways to enrich World War II studies.¹⁶

Intelligence history, conceived in this broad way, is one "missing dimension" of World War II history that is now being explored. Another, in which many of the linkages are still to be made, is the history of technology. Here particularly the Cold War casts its long retrospective shadow – the shadow of the mushroom cloud. Yet, taking the last half-century as a whole, nuclear weapons were probably not the most significant technological development of World War II.¹⁷

In July 1945, with Germany defeated and Japan encircled, the staff of *Time* magazine was working on a cover story about the weapon that had won the war. The subject was radar – an acronym adopted by the U.S. Navy in 1940 for radio detection and ranging devices. Their research took journalists back to the British sharing of the pioneering research on microwaves in the dark days of 1940, and then on through the massive program of development at MIT's RadLab (radiation laboratory) to the miniaturized radar systems used to guide planes and ships in the last years of the war. In the end, however, very little of this research figured in *Time* magazine's cover story on the war's winning weapon. In its issue of 20 August 1945, a highly condensed account of radar, plus the graphics originally commissioned for the cover, began on page 78. By contrast *Time* featured "an event so much more enormous that, relative to it, the war itself shrank to minor significance." *Time* called it simply "The Bomb."¹⁸

The Cold War is synonymous with the Atomic Age. Innumerable diplomatic historians and political scientists have examined the casuistries of nuclear strategy and the evolution of arms control, the development of weapons systems and popular protests against their deployment. Social historians have explored the ramifications in cultural imagery, social conduct, and family life, and also the bid to tame the genie through "atoms for peace." This preoccupation is perhaps understandable in a country that lost its sense of international

14. Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986); Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Hitler's Image of the United States," *American Historical Review* 69 (December 1964): 1006–21.

15. David Reynolds, *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance, 1937–1941: A Study in Competitive Co-operation* (London, 1981), 249.

16. For example, Patrick Finney, "International History, Theory, and the Origins of the Second World War," *Rethinking History* 1, no. 3 (1997): 372–73.

17. I have developed the argument that follows in David Reynolds, *One World Divisible: A Global History since 1945* (New York, 2000), esp. 9–11, 494–538.

18. *Time*, 20 August 1945, 1, 78.

immunity in the nuclear age and endured the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. Yet it has distorted our perspective on World War II technologies. There was truth in the slogan of RadLab veterans that the Bomb had only ended the war whereas radar had won it. After all, their program had cost about 50 percent more, with a price tag of \$3 billion. Radar had a multitude of postwar applications, from microwave ovens and radio astronomy to systems for air traffic control. Equally important, hundreds of top scientists had been diverted from nuclear and particle physics – the sexy subjects of the 1930s – and exposed to microwaves. Radar was also the “crystal” science: wartime experience in using germanium and silicon as semiconductors in radar opened up solid state physics. Out of this work came directly the “transistor” in 1947–48 – one of the most important technological innovations of the last half-century – and, in little more than another decade, the integrated circuits and microtechnology that produced the computer chip. Of course the development of viable transistors owed much to investment and demand from the U.S. military, driven by the Cold War. But their intellectual origins lie in wartime. In short, preoccupation with the nuclear age has blinded some historians to the technological Pandora’s Box opened by World War II. Microelectronics is only one of a plethora of technologies whose wartime histories deserve closer study. Computing, antibiotics, and chemotherapy are among many other examples.¹⁹

The study of World War II is therefore expanding into new areas. High diplomacy is being integrated with the social history of the war, as in Holocaust studies or in the new military history. The missing dimension of intelligence, often linked with cultural history, is being fitted into the jigsaw. And it is time for studies of the technological impact of World War II to emerge from under the mushroom cloud.

Moving to my second major theme, the geographical scope of World War II studies is also changing. We are beginning to transcend the parochialism of much English-language writing and to take seriously the term *world* war. Consider the bodycount for a moment. In his history of the conflict, Gerhard Weinberg suggests a global death toll of sixty million. Of these, the United States lost three hundred thousand and the United Kingdom four hundred thousand. By contrast, the figure for China was about fifteen million and for the Soviet Union at least twenty-five million.²⁰ Weinberg admits that the Chinese and Soviet figures are estimates, but the order of magnitude is what matters here. As proportions of the prewar population, the United States lost less than 0.25 percent, the United Kingdom about 0.8 percent, China over 3 percent, and the Soviet Union more than 13 percent.

19. For introductory studies see Robert Buder, *The Invention that Changed the World: How a Small Group of Radar Pioneers Won the Second World War and Launched a Technical Revolution* (New York, 1996); and Michael Riordan and Lillian Hoddeson, *Crystal Fire: The Birth of the Information Age* (New York, 1997).

20. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York, 1994), 894.

The conflict in China has been neglected in the West because of the American preoccupation with the Pacific War and the British interest in Burma. Yet in 1941–42 the Japanese were still committing about one-third of their regular forces in China, thereby depriving themselves of vital manpower and resources to capitalize on their victories of the first critical year of the Pacific War. The “China Quagmire” is an important element in explanations of Japan’s eventual defeat. Neglect of the Soviet story has been even more serious. American and British accounts of the war in Europe still highlight the protracted debate between London and Washington about the timing and location of the “Second Front.” But it is worth noting that between June 1941 and June 1944 – the period from Hitler’s invasion of Russia until D-Day – 93 percent of the German Army’s battle casualties were inflicted by the Red Army. As late as January 1944 the Soviets were actively engaging over two hundred German divisions; the figure for the Americans was about twenty.²¹ By the time Anglo-American armies finally landed in Normandy, Germany had lost the war in Europe. What remained to be decided were the scale of its defeat and the division of the spoils. American epics about D-Day or the Bulge should be seen in that larger context.

Our expanded understanding of the Soviet war effort has been one of the major changes of the last decade. The Eastern Front has been given due weight in recent overviews of World War II by Gerhard Weinberg, John Keegan, and Richard Overy. The Soviet war experience has been detailed for English-language readers by scholars such as Mark Harrison, John Barber, and William Moskoff, and, on a more synthetic level, in books by Overy and Anthony Beevor. Attempts have also been made to set it alongside those of the United States and Great Britain.²² This work has been made possible by the opening up, albeit patchily, of Soviet archives since the Gorbachev era and the efflorescence of World War II scholarship in the former USSR.

What we have seen, in consequence, is the collapse of the Soviet Cold War paradigm of the Great Patriotic War. After the victory celebrations of the summer of 1945, Stalin rapidly decided to play down the wartime era. His costly bungles in the first eighteen months of the war, the “spontaneous destalinization” of 1941, the subversive effects of military service in Europe on the veterans – all these were reasons for discouraging historical reflection. In 1947 Victory Day was demoted from a state holiday to an ordinary working day. War

21. Jonathan R. Adelman, *Prelude to Cold War: The Tsarist, Soviet, and U.S. Armies in Two World Wars* (Boulder, 1988), 128.

22. Weinberg, *A World at Arms*; John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London, 1989); Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London, 1995). John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London, 1991); William Moskoff, *The Bread of Affliction: The Food Supply in the USSR during World War II* (New York, 1990); Richard Overy, *Russia’s War* (London, 1998); Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London, 1998); David Reynolds, Warren F. Kimball, and A. O. Chubarian, eds., *Allies at War: The Soviet, American, and British Experience, 1939–1945* (New York, 1994).

invalids were cleared from the streets, where they had been a familiar sight as beggars or hawkers, and despatched to special colonies. In addition, senior commanders were warned off publishing their reminiscences. Stalin explained that “it was too early to be writing memoirs so soon after these great events, at a time when passions were still too much aroused, and thus the memoirs would not have the required objectivity.”²³ It was not until the Brezhnev era, when controls were reasserted after the Khrushchev upheavals, that the Great Patriotic War became enshrined in official mythology. On the twentieth anniversary, 9 May 1965, Victory Day regained its place as a state holiday. The Ministry of Defense supervised all histories of the war and the figure of twenty million dead became orthodoxy (Stalin, anxious to play down the cost of victory, had spoken of seven million). At the national and local level, museums about the war proliferated and it was even expected that bridal couples, as part of wedding day rituals, would pay their respects at the nearest war memorial. Official history was a form of social control: the Brezhnev leadership hoped to restrain the sixties generation by inculcating respect for the sacrifices of their elders. The cult of history had replaced the cult of personality.

Not until Gorbachev did the paradigm break down. His Victory Day speech in 1985, just three months after his accession to the leadership, was called “The Lessons of the War and Victory” instead of the conventional title “The Immortal Exploit of the Soviet People.” Although professional historians were slower than journalists, novelists, and film-makers to open up the story of World War II, the last fifteen years have seen a flood of historical work. Its first effect was often to underline the costly heroism of the Soviet war effort. The death toll climbed to over twenty-seven million, with critics of the Soviet regime registering totals almost double that. Holocaust historians shed new light of the bestiality of the Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* and, often, the *Wehrmacht* itself in the new eastern territories in 1941–42. Studies of the Soviet home front exposed the food crisis, especially in rural areas outside the official rationing system, and the appalling conditions of besieged cities such as Leningrad and Stalingrad. Cultural historians highlighted the role of patriotic Russian history and the Orthodox church in boosting morale. But gradually “holy war” – to quote the famous song of 1941 – gave way to unholy war. Patriotism and self-sacrifice were only a partial explanation of Russian resistance. Equally important was the brutality of the regime, revealed especially in Stalin’s now infamous Orders 270 of August 1941 and 227 of July 1942, which decreed immediate execution for deserters and even those who retreated, as well as loss of all state allowances for their families. Over a million Soviet service personnel were punished for cowardice or insubordination, of whom 158,000 were executed. In the German Army in World War II between 13,000 and 15,000 soldiers were executed; in the

23. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, 1994), 104, and more generally chaps. 4–6.

U.S. Army the total was 102, including only 1 for desertion. The British Army, in which desertion was not a capital offense in World War II, executed 40.²⁴

In similar vein, other recent studies have shown how Nazi brutality in 1941–42 was matched by Soviet atrocities in 1942–43, as the NKVD returned to the “liberated territories” and meted out revenge for suspected collaboration. Some of these territories were Russian but much of the war on the Eastern Front was waged across the Ukraine, Belorussia and, more briefly, the Baltic states. In 1991 these Soviet republics achieved independence and their subsequent historical revisionism has hammered another nail into the coffin of Russia’s Holy War. “Collaborationists” have become “nationalists”; “anti-Soviet elements” have been transmuted into “freedom fighters.” It is estimated that up to one million former Red Army soldiers fought in front-line German combat units or in anti-partisan operations.²⁵ Thousands more served as non-combat auxiliaries. Another strand of the new nationalist history is the story of the deportations. During the war an estimated two million people from what were termed “unreliable population groups” were moved to “special settlements” in Siberia and Central Asia. The Volga Germans were transported en masse in 1941 but most of the deportations occurred in 1943–44, after the Red Army returned to former Soviet territory. Nearly half were ethnic Germans, but the remainder included 180,000 Crimean Tatars and 360,000 Chechens – a statistic that is not irrelevant if one wants to understand the conflicts of the 1990s.²⁶ Thus, the Great Patriotic War is being deconstructed into a series of national, often nationalist, histories.

In short, the collapse of the Soviet empire destroyed the historiographical paradigm of Russia’s Holy War. Ideological clarity has been replaced by moral ambiguity; instead of an affirmed, overarching meaning we see multiple meanings that are fiercely contested. The result is a ferment of historical writing.

More generally, the historiographical legacies of the Soviet collapse suggest another way to conceptualize the meaning of World War II itself. This is my third general theme. During the Cold War it was tempting to take that struggle as the leitmotif of the century, by predating the Soviet-American rivalry to 1917 (Wilson versus Lenin) or by talking of a “short twentieth century” from 1917 to 1991, spanned by the rise and fall of the Soviet Union.²⁷ Today the Cold War itself can be set in larger geopolitical frameworks, particularly the collapse of empires and the proliferation of states. Although neglected in the journalistic

24. Overy, *Russia's War*, 160. See also Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 95–96; and John Ellis, *World War II: The Sharp End*, (2d ed., (London, 1990), 232–33, 243.

25. Mark R. Elliott, “Soviet Military Collaborators during World War II,” in *Ukraine during World War II: History and its Aftermath*, ed. Yury Boshyk (Edmonton, Alberta, 1986), 92–93.

26. Vera Tolz, “New Information about the Deportation of Ethnic Groups in the USSR during World War 2,” in *World War 2 and the Soviet People*, ed. John Garrard and Carol Garrard (New York, 1993), 161–78.

27. Cf. Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York, 1967); Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994).

reviews of December 1999,²⁸ that was one of the major themes of the last century. And World War II marked a turning point in the story.

At its center the war is about the rise and fall of three brutal empires. Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich reached its zenith in 1940–41 with the conquest of much of Scandinavia, Western Europe, and the western USSR. In Germany's wake came Italy's opportunistic drives into the Balkans and North Africa. Japan's empire, starting with Korea and Taiwan and enlarged in the 1930s in Manchuria and eastern China, peaked in the spectacular victories across the western Pacific and southeast Asia in the winter of 1941–42. In the spring of 1942 the Axis controlled over one-third of the world's population and raw materials (compared with proportions of 10 percent and 5 percent, respectively, in 1939).²⁹ Yet by the autumn of 1943, Italy had surrendered; less than two years later both Germany and Japan were under Allied occupation. All three empires lay in ruins.

But their destruction had required the mobilization of new imperial powers. The Soviet Union was, in effect, a truncated version of the old tsarist empire, under new leadership. Unlike the polyglot Habsburg and Ottoman empires, the Russian empire had survived World War I, revolution, and civil war. Despite Stalin's forced modernization, however, it nearly crumbled under Nazi hammer blows in 1941 and 1942. But victory in the "Great Patriotic War" shored up the regime and salvaged the Russian empire for nearly half a century until its disintegration in 1991. Victory also projected its power deep into Eastern and Central Europe. That Soviet presence was an essential precondition of the Cold War. Yet, to echo U.S. revisionist writings, so was the equally novel mobilization and projection of American power. Not only did the war pull the United States out of the Depression (1939 still saw 17 percent unemployment), it also diverted industrial capability to armaments and enlarged the federal government. Moreover, it engendered a new conviction that U.S. security was bound up with the stability of Europe and that the United States had a mission to redeem the world in its own image. Hence Washington's readiness for unprecedented global commitments.

The vulnerability of much of the world to Soviet and American competition was also a result of the war's solvent effect on empires. In particular, Japan's victories shook the foundations of European colonial rule in Asia. Conquered or besieged in Europe in 1940–41, the British, French, and Dutch lacked the capacity to shore up their vast Asian domains, which crumbled before the Japanese onslaught. Although the Europeans scrambled back into many of their possessions in 1945–46, their credibility and capacity as rulers had been irreparably damaged. The British pulled out of India in 1947, the Dutch from the East

28. According to *Time* magazine, for instance, the "three great themes" of the century were democracy, civil rights, and science and technology – each undoubtedly important but all very U.S. centered. *Time*, 31 December 1999, 20–29.

29. Alfred E. Eckes, Jr., *The United States and the Global Struggle for Minerals* (Austin, 1979), 84.

Indies in 1949, the French from Indochina in 1954. This exodus from empire had a knock-on effect elsewhere. When the United Nations was founded in 1945, it had 51 members. By 1960, the total was 100; twenty years later it was 152. Although the long-term trend toward decolonization might have been inexorable, the process was much quicker and more abrupt because of the impact of World War II. In Asia, the Middle East, and later Africa, the superpowers stepped to pick up the pieces of decolonization. Global Cold War was, in part, a product of imperial disintegration.

In China, too, the war with Japan was a turning point. Some recent scholarship in Taiwan and the United States has sought to redeem the corrupt and feeble image of the Guomintang regime, depicting it, for instance, as a modernizing force.³⁰ While that is surely an exaggeration, there can be little doubt that the long struggle with Japan sapped the energies of the regime and eliminated its leading personnel. Whereas the Guomintang had consolidated itself by the mid-1930s, the Sino-Japanese war of 1937–1945 undermined its still shaky foundations. Communist victory in the renewed civil war of 1946–1949 was by no means inevitable, but World War II had made it much more likely.

Outside Europe, therefore, 1945 opened up the national question. In the heart of Europe, it effected a partial resolution. World War II in Europe was Hitler's war – no question. But the dry wood for his conflagration came from the ethnic tinderboxes of countries such as Poland (only two-thirds Polish in 1938) or Czechoslovakia (where Czechs were barely a majority and nearly a quarter of the population was German). The multinational states of the region represented the debris of the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Romanov, and Ottoman empires. During the 1940s Nazi extermination programs, the redrawing of borders, and vast refugee movements created states that were far more ethnically coherent than their interwar predecessors. Almost all the population of postwar Poland was Polish; virtually all the Germans had been expelled from Czechoslovakia by 1947. To quote the French historian Jacques Rupnik: "Central Europe used to be about multinational states that claimed to be multinational. It was then turned into multinational states that claimed to be national. Finally, it became a series of nation-states which actually (almost) were ethnically homogeneous nation-states."³¹ To the east and south, however, the victories of Stalin and Tito confirmed the Russian and Serb empires for two generations and froze their national questions until the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s these were thawed out by opportunist politicians from Moscow to Belgrade, from Chechnya to Bosnia, and the result was a geopolitical avalanche. On past

30. See the varied essays in one of the few recent English-language attempts to look directly at China's war: James C. Hsiung and Steven I. Levine, eds., *China's Bitter Victory: The War with Japan, 1937–45* (Armonk, NY, 1992), esp. intro., chaps. 1–2, 6–8. See also William C. Kirby, "The Internationalization of China: Foreign Relations at Home and Abroad in the Republican Era," *The China Quarterly* 150 (June 1997): 433–58.

31. Jacques Rupnik, "Central Europe or Mitteleuropa?" *Daedalus* 119 (Winter 1990): 260.

precedent we may expect that the wars of the Soviet succession and the Yugoslav succession will run for many years.

Situating the 1940s within the larger rhythms of imperial collapse and nationalist self-assertion is one example of how World War II might be envisioned anew in the post-Cold War era. But I am not postulating any single “meaning” for the conflict. By the end of the twentieth century we are too post-modernist for any absolutist view of historical truth. Looking back, it is all too clear that many “lessons” of the war have been nationally specific.

This raises in my mind some doubts about Richard Bosworth’s claim that the end of the Cold War has destroyed the tyranny of “the long Second World War” over modern memory. Bosworth’s book, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (1993), is a stimulating and eclectic overview of seven national historiographies, rooting them in wider patterns of political and cultural change. It has to be said that, as used by Bosworth, “Auschwitz” and “Hiroshima” are extremely elastic concepts – the former becoming a shorthand for brutal nationalism, the latter a symbol of technocratic imperialism. Nevertheless, the author’s main contention seems clear. He argues that “the Second World War, in many parts of the world, has lost the overwhelming ethical force which it once possessed.” In particular, the year 1989 marked the end of the long Second World War, “at least in Europe,” as “the ethical values of anti-Fascism, the Resistance and the People’s war were finally obscured or replaced.” What Bosworth perceives and welcomes instead is a new pluralism of historical debate – “argument without end” in the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl’s famous definition of history – which he affirms as “the absolute base for any democracy.”³²

In Bosworth’s eyes, the historiographical ferment in the former Soviet Union is therefore a hopeful sign. But although we undoubtedly know more about what happened there in 1941–1945 than hitherto, the new nationalist historiographies demonstrate that past history remains in thrall to present politics. More generally, it is surely arguable that the Second World War retains its grip on memory and myth. As Bosworth admits, “the paradigm shift, described in this book as occurring in all the other combatant societies, has never happened in Japan.” Although not devoting a chapter to the state of Israel, he also notes briefly that it is “another of the products of the ‘long Second World War’ – born of Zionism, which was “another of the nationalisms invented in the declining Habsburg Empire,” and legitimated by memorialization of the Holocaust. Furthermore, he admits that the long Second World War is still “palpably alive” in the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe, where “the sort of nuanced debate, the give and take which has been established in most combatant societies, have scarcely begun.”³³

32. R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima: History Writing and the Second World War, 1945–1990* (London, 1993); cf. review by Chris Lorenz in *History and Theory* 35 (1996): 234–52.

33. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz*, 186, 88–89, 193.

Even in Western Europe, the 1990s have cast doubt on his central claim. “Auschwitz” in its narrow and sharpest sense still exerts ethical force – from Mitterrand’s France to Haider’s Austria. Although unified Germany finally moved its seat of government back to Berlin – thereby apparently transcending its “long Second World War” exile – the anguished debate about a Holocaust memorial in the new capital is more evidence of “the past that will not pass away,” to borrow the title of Ernst Nolte’s famous 1986 essay. Even in Britain, one of the relatively stable and contented victor nations, popular attitudes to the European Union are still inextricably bound up with a sense of alienation from the continent, confirmed in 1940, and with widespread suspicion that the EU is simply a peaceful form of German domination.

Which brings us back to the United States. Interestingly, this is the one major belligerent that Richard Bosworth omits from his book, on two grounds. First, the United States has been “the powerhouse of world historiography” – a generator of debate in other countries because of its vast academic sector and because, as a nation of immigrants, it was a global microcosm. Second, says Bosworth, the United States “was not a participant in the Second World War to the degree that the other societies analyzed in this book were.” For what he calls “a visceral experience of war, the United States would have to await Vietnam.”³⁴

Veterans of Guadalcanal or Bastogne might dispute Bosworth’s contention but, on a global scale, he has a point. All the other belligerent countries in this horrendous conflict are still left with a sense of being victims. This is true even of the ostensible victors – the Soviet Union and Great Britain. Only the United States – unbombed, unoccupied, and relatively unbloodied – emerged as an unqualified victor. Hence the persistence of the “good war” paradigm – to use the phrase popularized by Studs Terkel. Significantly, the areas in which that paradigm has been most contested relate to domestic “victims” of the U.S. war effort – such as Japanese-Americans deported from the West Coast. Paul Fussell, wartime GI and postwar professor, wrote in 1989: “America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like and has thus been unable to use such understanding to re-interpret and redefine the national reality and arrive at something like public maturity.”³⁵ Fussell was denouncing the sanitization of war, but his observation, without the polemic, might be translated onto a higher plane. As the arsenal of democracy the United States helped turn the course of the war. But this was a conflict fought, as far as most of the population was concerned, at arm’s length. Ironically, the war that will not pass away almost passed America by.

Yet it is unwise to end with an aphorism. As historian John Jeffries has noted, the “good war” paradigm is tied to the idea of World War II as a “watershed”

34. *Ibid.*, 193.

35. Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York, 1989), 268; cf. Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two* (New York, 1984).

for the United States. Critics of the paradigm, such as many historians of race relations, often talk the language of continuity.³⁶ If the war *was* a watershed that is above all because of its effect on the U.S. economy. “It was not the war alone, but the experience of the Depression and war together which separated one generation of Americans from those who followed, observed Neil Wynn.”³⁷ If Bosworth had included a chapter on the United States, this would surely have been the core of his account of America’s “long Second World War” and the source of his ethical polarity of victims and victors. In the 1933 the American Dream had turned into a nightmare, with unemployment at 25 percent, the banking system in ruins, and investment barely two-thirds of what it had been in 1929. Despite partial recovery, the New Deal did not end the Depression and was in many ways “a holding operation for American society” until the boom years of 1941–1945.³⁸ In the American paradigm the “good war” is inextricably linked to the bad Depression.

Warren Kimball asserts that World War II is in danger of being submerged in the Cold War. I have tried to suggest ways in which, at least outside the United States, World War II studies are flourishing – because of shifts in disciplinary emphasis, geographical scope, and temporal perspectives. In the end, however, there is danger in the game of historiographical empire building and empire shrinking, in trying to submerge the Cold War in the long Second World War, rather than incorporating the short Second World War in the long Cold War. For these are political labels rather than tools of precise description. They have identifiable objects, of course – one does not have to adopt an extreme post-modernist nihilism about language – but they should not be treated as discrete, watertight compartments. Nor should they be detached from the other great historical experience of the middle third of the twentieth century – the Great Depression – which apparently portended the final crisis of liberal capitalist democracy and encouraged the rival challenges of national socialism and international communism.

A broader view suggests the need to consider all three phenomena in tandem, as part of a sustained crisis of politics and ideologies, of economies and societies, across much of the developed and developing world in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1945 the Soviet Union seemed to many a double victor – triumphant militarily over the imperialism of Nazi Germany and economically over the vagaries of unplanned capitalism. Americans also celebrated a dual triumph, deeming themselves the people who had won the war and, in the process, had solved their worst economic crisis. Despite some earlier studies that located

36. John Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago, 1996), chap. 1.

37. Neil A. Wynn, “The ‘Good War’: The Second World War and Postwar American Society,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 3 (1996): 478.

38. Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (London, 1989), 311.

the roots of American Cold War policy in the lessons of the 1930s,³⁹ the Depression has shrunk from historical gaze even more than the war. That seems to me deeply unfortunate. The 1930s matter as much as the 1940s. We need to see the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War in interconnection – symptoms and causes of the most profound period of global instability in the remarkably volatile twentieth century. With the end of the Cold War, we are also in a better position to do so.

39. Charles S. Maier, “The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American Economic Policy after World War II,” *International Organization* 31 (Autumn 1977): 607–33; Michael J. Hogan, *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (New York, 1987), esp. chap. 1.