
World War II: Comments on the Roundtable

The essays prepared for this issue deal with the history of World War II from the perspective of different countries. Each offers both bibliographic information and the perspectives of the author on prior writings and the author's own concepts. Missing is an assessment of the United Kingdom's views since the disappointing essay by Alex Danchev reflects neither the expectations raised by his superior prior works nor the possibilities of the subject assigned to him by the editors. Furthermore, except for references to the absence of China, there is almost nothing about India and the members of the British Commonwealth. On the assumption that those readers who have reached this point in this issue of *Diplomatic History* do not need to have their readings summarized for them, I would like to comment on some general features of the essays and the issues that all of them overlooked.¹

The critical point made by Warren Kimball, that so much of World War II history has been relegated to the margins of Cold War history, may be true for U.S. diplomatic historians; but it is most assuredly not true for anyone else on the globe. The two sides of this equation deserve comment. Why the neglect by Americans, and why the great interest of others? The neglect by American diplomatic historians is surely in part a generational matter: those who have been writing in the last twenty-five years grew up during the Cold War, saw it as an extremely important, if not dominating, element in the international situation of the United States, and hence concentrated their energies upon investigating it. For them, World War II was a prelude rather than a major event that convulsed the globe. Contributing to this was an availability of American documentation and often not much else. Since with few honorable exceptions, American diplomatic historians tend to be linguistic isolationists – if it is not in English, it is not important – this situation was too convenient to ignore. That narrow view of what is relevant has been so prevalent that it was even applied to the period before the United States was drawn into the war: a thirty page article on “U.S. Policy and the European War, 1939–1941” could be written and

1. A sampling of errors would include Mark Stoler's retroactive transfer of pre-World War I territories from the Habsburg to the Romanov empire; Loyd Lee's omission of the works of Roger Lotchin on the wartime transformation of the American West; and David Reynolds's omission of David Glantz's many fine books on the Eastern Front.

accepted for publication in this journal without reference to the important literature on the subject published in such exotic languages as German!²

The situation in other countries, as the essays make clear, is entirely different. World War II looms very large not only in the public perception of the past – as it obviously does in the United States – but also in the scholarship. The reason for this may well lie in the dramatic way in which the war affected those societies, a point many Americans have forgotten about their own. No one in the states that formerly made up the Soviet Union, the former Soviet bloc, Germany, Italy, Japan, and China, can possibly ignore the terrible human and material costs of a conflict that cost literally millions of lives. As in most of Europe after World War I, so in Central and Eastern Europe after World War II, anyone looking for a family in which no one was killed or wounded during the conflict will have enormous difficulty locating one. The colossal changes brought about by the largest war in recorded history have been and continue to be obvious in a way that the changes in American society brought about by the war have somehow come to be accepted as normal, standard, and eternal by most Americans.

This divergence might be bridged in two ways. In the first place, American diplomatic historians would do well to take advantage of the massive releases of previously classified documents that have occurred since 1970. Although the German naval historian Jürgen Rohwer demonstrated on the basis of material available in the National Archives for twenty-five years that information gained from the interception and decoding of German naval messages in 1941, which could have been utilized to create incidents in the Atlantic every day or two, was instead used to avoid incidents as much as possible – a finding that invalidates many standard readings of FDR's policy – no American diplomatic historian has, to the best of my knowledge, touched this material.³

Second, historians ought also to make use of the documentary releases of the 1990s. These include extensive records pertaining to the policies of neutrals during World War II, especially American and British reading of their traffic. Given the enormous importance of such issues as Turkish supply of chrome, Swedish supply of ball bearings, and the problem of bases in the Portuguese Azores for both sides, to mention only a few examples, there is here a gold mine for scholars. On top of all this there is the recent opening of materials pertaining to the role of Switzerland. While the public focus has been on the German looting of gold and its laundering by Swiss banks, there has been no real discussion of the critical factor affecting the reticence of the Western Allies: the need for access to and support of prisoners of war held by the Axis. The whole

2. Justus W. Doenecke, "U.S. Policy and the European War, 1939–1941," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Fall 1995): 669–98.

3. Jürgen Rohwer, "Die USA und die Schlacht im Atlantik 1941" ["The USA and the Battle of the Atlantic 1941], in *Kriegswende Dezember 1941* ["The Turn in the War in December 1941], ed. Jürgen Rohwer and Eberhard Jäckel (Coblenz, 1984), 81–103.

field of POW issues in World War II is really in its infancy, although there are signs of increasing attention to it.⁴

At the top and at the bottom of society, American historians have much to do. The generational factor that is so markedly, in my opinion rather excessively, stressed by Mark Stoler, is in desperate need of a new beginning. Those in charge of policy in the United States, as in most other countries, as well as the diplomatic and military leaders, saw the world through the framework of *their* prior experiences. What that means is that they did not see World War II through the prism of the Cold War; they saw it as survivors, participants in, or officials of their countries in World War I. It was their reading of that prior experience, barely two decades in the past, that they had in mind as they faced the developments before them. It was what they thought had gone right or wrong during and after that formative experience in their lives that greatly affected their decisions and their choices. Just a few examples. The demand for unconditional surrender was rooted in the belief that it had been a mistake not to insist on Germany's surrender in 1918; American and British soldiers were not going to have to fight the Germans a third and the Japanese a second time. The leadership of the Soviet Union was very much aware of the fact that World War I had produced the revolutions in Russia out of which they had emerged victorious; would a second war lead to more of the same? Moving down the ladder, one might ask whether the sending of portions of the American Third Army into Brittany in August 1944 was not primarily an effort to seize the ports through which the American forces had been built up in 1917–18? To move even further down, in the documents available in the Public Record Office in Kew, one can often find the Axis referred to as the "Central Powers;" surely the sort of terminological incongruity that will make any historian smile.

This influence of World War I memories and interpretations, whether correct or incorrect, was most assuredly not restricted to the Allied side. The belief of the vast majority of those in charge in Germany – and by no means only Adolf Hitler himself – that Germany had not been defeated at the front in World War I but had lost because of the collapse of the German home front, must be seen, but is rarely considered, as a central element in the enthusiasm in the German government for war with the United States (with Hitler actually holding back the German navy, which wanted war with the United States already in October 1939). If one believed in the "stab-in-the-back," then the role of the United States in enabling the Western Allies to hold in 1918 and turn to the offensive and win the war becomes the legend. The generational aspect was also central to the shift of Italy and Japan from one side to the other between World War I and World War II. In the erroneous belief that the new conflict was simply a resumption of the old, they looked for imperial expansion in the

4. Note the recent book edited by Günter Bischof and Rüdiger Overmans, *Kriegsgefangenschaft im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Eine vergleichende Perspektive* [Prisoners of war in World War II: A comparative perspective] (Osnabrück, 1999).

traditional way. Since they had snatched all that could be snatched from the Central Powers in World War I, further expansion could only be at the expense of their former allies.

For a historiography that looks back at World War II through the intervening rather than the preceding years, there is here a major challenge. Furthermore, as David Reynolds wisely highlights in his piece, the Great Depression was very much on the minds of all, leaders and public alike. In the United States, the obvious example is the memory of the bonus march and related problems as incentives for the GI Bill of Rights as well as a general reorientation in the effort of the federal government to assure “full employment” in the postwar years. In the case of Great Britain, here was a factor both in the development of new social policy concepts during the war and the victory of the Labour party in the 1945 election.

The victory of Labour in the election of July 1945 also intersects with the process of decolonization. It is too often forgotten that Winston Churchill had been in the political wilderness in the 1930s primarily because of his opposition to the moves by his own Conservative party toward something approaching “Home Rule” for India (a major factor also in the preference of Labour for Lord Halifax as prime minister in May 1940). The development of decolonization during and after World War II was certainly an important aspect of that conflict. When President Roosevelt, in the face of the urgings of his military advisers – and the push from London in the same direction – rejected the annexation to the United States of islands under mandate to Japan as an objective of American policy, and instead insisted on trusteeships, he was applying in a concrete instance a general policy that informed his dealings with such subjects as India and French Indochina. Is it just a coincidence that the units of the French army of Charles de Gaulle that were being rebuilt at President Roosevelt’s urging were precluded from landing in Southeast Asia but instead were to be included in the “Coronet” invasion of the Tokyo Plain in 1946?

The essays gathered in this issue do not include one on France, but certainly a wide range of diplomatic, political, military, and economic issues concerning France were of enormous importance during World War II. That nation is still wracked today by problems of that war’s memory, and it is not surprising that generational change there has brought new perspectives to the fore. In this context, both the home country and its colonial empire have been and will be the focus of historical writing. Inside France questions about collaboration and resistance remain hotly disputed. For considerable time during the war, the portions of the colonial empire that had rallied to de Gaulle, or had been turned over to him by the British and later the Americans, in a real sense *were* France. The impacts of this on subsequent developments are only beginning to be examined.⁵

5. See, for example, Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War, 1940–45* (Manchester, 1998).

While it is true that military operations in Africa were geographically limited to segments of the North, Northwest, and Northeast portions and to Madagascar, the effects of the war on that continent surely deserve further study. The Axis powers planned to divide it into three parts: the North to Italy, the middle to Germany, and the South to an extremist Afrikaan state. Everyone knows that it did not work out that way, but the continent changed dramatically in other ways. A few obvious questions: what was the effect of the Takoradi supply route across Africa to the Middle East theater of war on the people who lived along that route? To what extent was the physical damage of fighting in Tunisia offset by infrastructure construction for the Allied armies?

The essay by Amir Weiner stresses the disillusioning impact of the winter war against Finland, the experience of seeing the standard of living in the territories annexed in the period 1939–1941, the initial disastrous defeats at the hands of the Germans in 1941, and the experience of moving into Central Europe in 1944–45 on people in the Soviet Union who had grown up in the Soviet system and had been socialized in it. Combined with the newly developed assertiveness of war veterans, this surely contributed to the eventual collapse of the whole system as Weiner suggests. What needs further exploration in the case of the Soviet experience is the way in which World War II for a time provided the regime with what may well be called its only period of legitimacy in the eyes of the great majority of the population. It took the German invasion with its integrally included atrocities to make Josef Stalin look beneficent – surely a considerable accomplishment.

In this case also the prior, not the subsequent, events have vanished from the historiography. Most of the areas overrun by German forces in the early stages of the war in the East had been occupied by German forces in World War I. There were certainly incidents and problems, but the memory of German occupation *then* highlighted the contrast with occupation *now*. Similarly, the German treatment of prisoners of war in the prior conflict had been entirely different from what the population could now see with their own eyes. The emphasis on the Cold War has correctly established that World War II gave the Soviet Union its superpower status; it has obscured the likelihood that the legitimacy it conferred on the Soviet system may well have deferred its collapse for decades – and left Stalin with a remnant of positive memory even now.

This turns attention to Germany's role in the war. It is unfortunate that Omer Bartov, who has contributed so much to our understanding of the internal dynamics of the German army, has completely failed to grasp the broader context and its implications for any recognition of the nature of World War II. Leaving aside his unlikely suggestion that absent the efforts of the Red Army, "Nazism would have been a fact in Europe for many more decades" in the face of a steady dropping of atomic bombs on Germany, Bartov's total misreading of the aims of Hitler and Germany in the war touches on the most significant single fact about World War II: its difference from World War I and other prior wars. Far from wanting to revise the Versailles peace of 1919, Hitler always

ridiculed those on the German political right who argued for such, in his opinion, ridiculously inadequate goals. Derisively calling them “Grenzpolitiker,” border politicians, he assured his listeners in the 1920s that he was a “Raumpolitiker,” a politician of space. It was, he asserted, ridiculous to lose vast numbers of precious German soldiers to retake the tiny snippets of land that had been taken from Germany in 1919; the fact that his rivals called for such action only showed what utter fools they were. What Germany needed was hundreds of thousands of square kilometers on which to settle German farm families whose numerous offspring would both replace the casualties of war and provide the needed soldiers for the next installment in a sequence of conquests that would end with German control of the globe.

It was this concept of a demographic revolution in the world that made World War II not a continuation of World War I but an entirely different type of conflict. And this was neither a coincidence nor an accident. Scholarship on the Holocaust, on German treatment, or rather mistreatment, of Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), on the killing of the handicapped inside and outside prewar Germany,⁶ and on planning for the reordering of people and space in eastern Europe is beginning to highlight this characteristic of the war. It is in this direction that scholarship in the future will need to move. Unlike the Seven Years War, which determined whether English or French would be the major language of Canada and which would be required of government officials as a second language, World War II was to determine which populations would live and which would disappear. The Ukrainians, for example, were to vanish from the earth as punishment for living on agricultural land the Germans coveted – whether the Ukrainians realized it or not. For whom were the terrible medical experiments to find means of mass, as opposed to surgical, sterilization destined in a world without handicapped, Jews, and Sinti and Roma?

Neither the Italians nor the Japanese ever grasped the fact that their main ally had objectives that threatened rather than complemented their own; they assumed that this was a war like prior ones for added colonies, bases, and spheres of interest. In the field of diplomacy, this meant that they never understood why their pleas to Berlin to make peace with the Soviet Union so that all three could concentrate on their main enemies, Great Britain and the United States, always fell on deaf ears. In the military field, it meant that there was far less coordination than the Allies were able to achieve.⁷ The emphasis in postwar scholarship on the tensions between the United States and Great Britain and between each of these two and the Soviet Union has obscured the far greater difficulties the Axis powers had in working together. Here is a major

6. There is currently no comprehensive work on the killing of the handicapped *outside* pre-1939 Germany to accompany Henry Friedlander's excellent study of the process *inside* Germany, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

7. Johanna M. Meskill's fine book, *Hitler & Japan: The Hollow Alliance* (New York, 1966) could now be reworked on the basis of subsequent literature and massive declassification of relevant documents.

field for future investigation, especially now that so much of the intercepted Japanese, German, and Italian traffic has been declassified.

In regard to the issues of the exhibition about the crimes of the German armed forces, Omer Bartov goes a small way to opening the special problems of the different character of World War II from the preceding great conflict. What is missing is again the emphasis on the intervening period. Those who led Germany's military forces in World War II had been officers in World War I. What had happened to them in between? They had served in an army that executed fewer than two hundred of its own men; they now signed off on the death sentences of over thirty thousand by the latest estimates. What had changed them in the interim? In his book on the barbarization of the German military on the Eastern Front in World War II Bartov recounts the end result; where did the descent begin? Recent studies engage the systematic bribery of the highest German commanders by Hitler.⁸ Where did that start?

Just one suggestion for future examination, that of language use. Right after the largest single massacre perpetrated by the Germans in World War II, that at Babi Yar, the local Army commander, Field Marshal von Reichenau, described these events in a notorious order as "gerechte Sühne," just punishment. He sent a copy of this description of the murder of thousands of children to his Army Group Commander, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. The latter, the man then at the top of the German army's rank list, was so enthused about this order that he encouraged his other subordinate commanders to issue similar ones to be read to their troops. An interesting sense of the term "just." It fits with von Rundstedt's subsequently heading up a German military court in the fall of 1944. While he and at least one of the other judges were secretly accepting large bribes from their beloved Führer, the accused were not allowed to appear or to be represented. This court in which the judges accepted bribes from one side while the other was not permitted a defense was called an "Ehrenhof," a court of honor. An interesting concept of "honor." The descent of a large group of men into a morass of crime and corruption cries out for further analysis.

It was the insistence of Japan on war with the United States in the face of the endless efforts of President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull to keep them talking until they could see for themselves that Germany would lose, not win, the war that combined the prior continuation of Japanese expansion at the expense of China with Germany's war for world domination. Yukiko Koshiro deals with the confusion of the name and course of the war in postwar Japan. Although there has been some willingness to look at the past, there remains an unfortunate unwillingness to face reality. Attitudes of racial superiority toward other Asians as well as whites never having been faced, they

8. Norman J. W. Goda, "Black Marks: Hitler's Bribery of His Senior Officers during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (June 2000): 413-52; Gerd R. Ueberschär and Winfried Vogel, *Dienen und Verdienen: Hitlers Geschenke an seine Eliten* [To serve and to earn: Hitler's gifts to his elites] (Frankfurt/M, 1999).

continue toward Koreans and others in Japan today. Studies of both the higher direction of the war and of local situations firmly avert the view from the horrors of Japanese rule. There is no recognition of the fact that it was Japanese actions that opened the people of China to rule by the Communists, a fate that they have to wrestle with even after the peoples of Eastern Europe have begun to free themselves from the imposition of Soviet rule that Germany had brought to them. There is an ironic twist to the fact that a country that regularly pretended to be fighting communism not only enabled the Communists to take over China but in the final months of World War II wanted to ally itself with the Soviet Union against the Western powers.

Future research on the war in the Pacific and South and Southeast Asia will be hampered by the negligence of the U.S. State Department in not insisting on an access agreement for the returned and unmicrofilmed records to Japan in the 1950s. The Germans did not always adhere to their agreement with this country and with Britain, but much had been filmed and most of the time there was compliance. The Japanese government, on the other hand, not only directed a systematic destruction of possibly incriminating records in the summer of 1945 but also refuses access to both Japanese and foreign scholars. It will not do to blame the inadequacy of Western scholarship on a lack of language skills when the records are closed to research.

Perhaps some day there will be a change in Tokyo, a change that can only benefit Japan by bringing on a reconciliation of peoples in East Asia analogous to that which has been occurring in Europe as many Germans have faced up to their past. If and when there is such a change, among the key issues in need of research are the planning in the Japanese government for the future of the conquered territories, the role of key individuals like Tojo Hideki, and the process of decision making at the highest levels. There have recently been some attempts to gather information on daily life and public impressions inside Japan during the war; more is needed.⁹ This brings us back to the broader issues of domestic effects of the war that Loyd Lee has covered in his contribution.

There can be no argument with Lee's assertion in the title of his piece: "We Have Just Begun to Write." People who survived did not emerge from the war the way they were when their country entered it. Lee offers substantial bibliographic information, but he is correct in stressing the enormous gaps that remain. In view of the recent vogue of social history, it is certainly strange that so much about children, veterans, migrations, and other subjects remains to be explored. What about changes in the environment at a time when that has also become fashionable? More women lost their lives in the Soviet armed forces than men in the American military; when will those interested in women's history take on this subject in a comprehensive manner beyond the emphasis

9. An example is Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York, 1992). See also Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley, 1998).

on fighter pilots? What can be said about cross-national perspectives on this and other issues?

Whatever may be the future interests of historians in the United States, both the American public and historians as well as the publics of other nations are certain to continue to be very interested indeed in the largest war in history. I have commented elsewhere in print on additional facets of these matters now and the possibilities in the future.¹⁰ What the collection of papers presented here ought to show and does show is that while a great deal of work has been done, the field remains wide open for those who are both inquisitive and energetic.

10. Gerhard L. Weinberg, "World War II Scholarship, Now and in the Future," *Journal of Military History* 61 (April 1997): 335–46; idem, "Unexplored Questions about the German Military during World War II," *ibid.* 62 (April 1998): 371–80.