

HOW MUCH WAR SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A COURSE ON WORLD WAR II?

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In the not too distant past historians felt little sense of guilt if their courses in modern history abruptly ended in 1939 as Europe stood on the brink of the Second World War. For many of them that war was a telling episode in their own lives and thus more appropriately treated by the journalist than by the historian. Those times have dramatically changed. If for my generation, World War II is associated with personal memory, however indistinct, for the students of the 1990s, it is ancient history. We have, after all, recently marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States entry into the conflict. Even more striking is the sea change of the last few years that has ended the post-WW II "settlement" and finally enabled us to treat *The Cold War as History*.¹ Not surprisingly courses on World War II have burgeoned and students, eager to understand this epic phenomenon and its significance for the contemporary world, have flocked into them.

Throughout my teaching career I have offered courses in modern European, modern German, and twentieth-century history, each of which has had a segment on the Second World War. While teaching about this conflict in the context of a more broadly defined course has posed particular challenges and problems, it has not been until recently that I have had an opportunity to do a course exclusively on the origins and history of World War II. In planning and implementing this course I faced what on the surface might appear to be a rather silly question, "How much military history should I include in a course on WW II?" Is it not patently obvious that a course on the Second World War ought centrally to feature a large dose of military history? Yet as Paul Kennedy reminds us,

No longer, it is argued, can a history of the war be confined to accounts of operations, generalship, and front-line combat. It must be widened to include the entire effort of the societies involved and thus to incorporate (among other things) the home fronts, political and propaganda aspects, ideology and race, social transformations, and changed position of women, culture, and art and literature. The historian taking this warfare-and-society approach is thus required to write what one might term *total history*.²(italics his)

¹ In 1967 Louis Halle published his insightful and comprehensive study of the Cold War under this title, *The Cold War as History* (NY: Harper and Row, 1967). Although in many ways highly successful, his effort to treat the Cold War as history was unfortunately premature.

² Paul Kennedy, "Battle by Battle, Inch by Inch," review of John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1989), and John Keegan, ed., *The Times Atlas of the Second World War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) in *New York Times Book Review*, December 31, 1989, 10.

Since it has been my goal from the point at which I first conceived and advertised the course to take a "warfare-and-society approach" and since the limits of a semester hardly allow for a *total*, comprehensive history of the war, the question I just posed is not idle and presumably has not been for many teaching courses on WW II.³ In this article I would like to examine this question in light of my experience, giving particular attention to the selection of an appropriate text from among the spate of general histories of the war now available.

Fundamental goals and objectives ought to inform basic choices about course topics, materials, and resources. A central course objective is understanding the significance of WW II for the history of the twentieth century. This means taking time to treat both the origins and consequences of the war. But, while the origins were systematically examined in the first three weeks of the course, I actually did not do justice to the consequences. This imbalance was picked up by several students in their course evaluations. As one noted succinctly, "Spend slightly less time on the origins and more on the aftermath."

A second major objective of the course is comprehending the Second World War in its global setting. I did not want to limit my treatment to Europe and the European theater of operations but to emphasize the world scope of this war.

Helping students grasp the nature and consequences of total war in the 1939-1945 period constitutes a third objective. How did the demands of total war affect the political, economic, social, and cultural institutions of the participating nations? How did individuals—soldiers and civilians alike—cope with those demands and experience total war? Could I cut through the mythology and the superficial generalizations that seem so pervasive in relation to this "good" war to lay bare the realities of wartime?⁴

History is enriched by providing a context for the examination of moral and ethical issues. Whether studying resistance and collaboration, the Holocaust, the saturation bombing of cities and the dropping of the A bomb, or the trial of persons accused of war crimes, WW II forces students to confront fundamental questions about human behavior and morality. In addition a narrowly defined course enables students to develop a fuller understanding of history as a discipline

³ I stated the following in the departmental course description, "The course is not a military history of the war, but rather an exploration of human experience in all its complexity during a time when societies mobilized their resources and energies for a world war."

⁴ In *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), ix, Paul Fussell argues, "For the past fifty years the Allied war has been sanitized and romanticized almost beyond recognition by the sentimental, the loony patriotic, the ignorant, and the bloodthirsty. I have tried to balance the scales." In attempting to do so Fussell shows the stupidity, crudity, brutality, cant, and corruption of war. In this fascinating and often perverse book, Fussell "lets his biases hang out in almost nihilistic abandon." (See Dan Pinck's review, "The Great War and Paul Fussell's Memory," *American Scholar*, 59 [Spring 1990], 292). Despite the power and brilliance of this work, in the end Fussell presents "a view of reality that no historian can accept." (See Noel Annan, *New York Review of Books*, Sept. 28, 1989, 4.)

by treating, for example, questions of interpretation and methodology, and to enhance their academic skills through a variety of assignments.

Given these objectives, I wondered what course text might best help me achieve them. With an eye on the academic market as well as the educated reading public whose general interest in military history has always been high, publishers and authors have eagerly exploited the fiftieth anniversary of the war. The result is a wealth of material from which to select. Certainly this is a positive problem, but having too many choices can create a dilemma for the instructor that is best solved by applying basic criteria in the selection process.

Since I am examining the war in its global dimensions, I want a work that reflects this orientation. On these grounds I can rule out M. K. Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987, 2nd ed. 1991), although this book is substantive, balanced, and attractively organized and packaged for student use. It also disqualifies Chester Wilmot's classic 1952 study, *The Struggle for Europe* (New York: Harper and Row) that remains for John Keegan "the supreme achievement of Second World War historiography, combining a passionate interest in events with a cool dissection of the material realities which underlay them."⁵ However, remaining very much in the picture are Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War: The Story of World War II* (New York: Penguin, 1979), now available in a new edition with John Pritchard revising the Asian material originally written by Wint; Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1989); Robert Leckie, *Delivered From Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: The Free Press, 1989); James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1980); Michael J. Lyons, *World War II: A Short History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989, 2nd ed. 1991); R. A. C. Parker, *Struggle for Survival: The History of the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Loyd Lee, *The War Years: A Global History of the Second World War* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990).

To be a significant asset in the course the text must help me achieve the goals and objectives spelled out above or be sufficiently brief to allow me to realize some of those objectives with additional material. Of obvious concern is the role the text will play in establishing an appropriate balance between standard military history and the *total* history of wartime. I also want the core book to engage student readers, combine synthesis with incisive analysis, reflect sound scholarship, lead students through the thicket of material in a logically organized manner, and be reasonably priced.

The assessment of possible texts in light of these criteria leads me to the following judgments. First, in the category of books we might classify as the

⁵ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 598.

heavyweights—that is those making some claim at comprehensiveness, those tipping the scales at about 3 pounds, and those running to 800 or more pages in length—fall Calvocoressi, Gilbert, Leckie, and marginally Ellis. A major disadvantage of these works is their length, a product of their very effort to be comprehensive. Using one of them as the course text places rather severe limits on additional course reading material, especially given the reading ability of many students today.⁶ For example, while the revised edition of Calvocoressi, et al., meets Kennedy's objective of *total* history and "promises to be much the best of all the books that salute a great war's anniversary,"⁷ it runs to 1,315 pages, which severely limits the students' opportunity to "hear" other voices. Given the value of exposing students to a variety of voices and perspectives, I would say "No" to *Total War* despite its many strengths. Martin Gilbert's effort at writing *A Complete History* not only suffers from the drawback of length, but also from a series of "large omissions."⁸ The incredibly prolific Gilbert eschews a chronological/topics structure for a chronological narrative strong on detail and weak on analysis, making "any comprehension of general patterns difficult."⁹ Robert Leckie's readable study takes the student from Versailles to Japan's surrender and features profiles of key figures, but has a decidedly American focus. Although more mature than his earlier books, it still lacks analytical sophistication and does not always incorporate the latest scholarship.

While not quite making it into the "heavyweight" category at a mere 643 pages, *Brute Force* by John Ellis has several drawbacks from my perspective. His work lacks the total approach that puts military history in the context of the larger history of the war, although he is very good in examining the economic underpinnings of the belligerents' war efforts. His treatment of military action is uneven. For example, he gives significantly more attention to the Mediterranean

⁶ The reading load in my course averaged 146 pages per week. On the course evaluations 56% of the students commented that the reading load was too heavy. As one noted, "The only complaint that I have for this course is that the reading load was very heavy. I think that with a little less reading, the course would be less overwhelming at times." Granted such complaints tend to be ritualistic, comparable to student comments about the university food service, but they still point to the fact that conscientious students frequently lack the patience and/or ability to digest substantial chunks of reading.

⁷ *The Economist*, 312 (Sept. 2, 1989), 83.

⁸ The term is Gordon Craig's who notes that Gilbert "has nothing to say about the background and causes of the war . . . the details of battle or the performance of different kinds of weapons . . . the nature of the war experience and the vast difference between the home front's idealized view of the conflict and the mixture of boredom, exasperation and terror it engendered in those who fought it. . . . The reader will look in vain for an analysis of wartime diplomacy or even of strategic planning; there is no systematic account of economic warfare; there is virtually no assessment of military systems, civilian-military relations in the belligerent countries, or . . . the performance of individual commanders." Gordon Craig, "Diary of a War," review of Gilbert's book in *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 26, 1989, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

theater than to either the Russian or Pacific theaters, a fact he paradoxically notes "with some disappointment."¹⁰ Third, he overstates his rather conventional thesis that the Allied victory over the highly skilled German military was the product of superior resources wastefully and crudely employed.

In contrast H. P. Willmott, in *The Great Crusade*, challenges the "popularly accepted but pernicious myth of German military excellence."¹¹ The subtitle of this work, *A New Complete History of the Second World War* is more than a little ironic, since Willmott has long held the "view that it is impossible for a single volume history to do justice to the war against Japan" let alone the war as a whole.¹² Willmott makes a gallant effort in under five hundred pages, yet his forte is clearly the discussion of grand strategy and operational analysis, the staples of traditional military history. Willmott adopts a chronological structure that enables him to provide a bird's eye view of the unfolding global conflict at given moments in time, but, as in the case of Gilbert's work, the approach provides less thematic unity and puts considerable burden on the student to find the patterns of coherence. For these reasons I have major reservations about selecting Willmott as my course text.

In the "short history" category, books by James Stokesbury, Michael Lyons, R. A. C. Parker, and Loyd Lee are the major contenders for top honors. Stokesbury produced his readable, balanced, and relatively short study in 1980. In addition to examining the war's origins and aftermath, the Nazi New Order in Europe, and wartime diplomacy, he emphasizes the military history of the war, which he handles with considerable deftness and economy. Lyons places his coverage of World War II in a context of twentieth-century conflict, moving from the Great War to Korea in a mere 331 pages of text. Parker's book is the most recent and "deals not only with military history, how the war was won and lost, but also analyzes its causes and consequences."¹³ In addition to his informed treatment of the decisive military episodes of the war, Parker has specific chapters on wartime economies, strategic bombing, morale, and the Holocaust. Lee's *The War Years: A Global History of the Second World War* is distinguished by its self-conscious effort to present the war in both its *total* and *global* nature. In 315 pages Lee achieves a genuine equality of treatment between the military and non-military dimensions of total war and is more attentive to the global ramifications of the war than other authors. His, for example, is the only history of the war to mention Kenya in the preface and to include sections on Latin America, Africa, and the

¹⁰ John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), xix.

¹¹ H. P. Willmott, *The Great Crusade*, (New York: The Free Press, 1989), xi.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ R. A. C. Parker, *Struggle for Survival: The History of the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), v.

Middle East in its assessment of the war's aftermath. Lee, however, pays a price for this balance in the quality of his military analysis, which is thin and suffers in comparison with that of the three other authors.

All four works have much in common. They are short and cover much the same ground—in the case of Stokesbury and Lyons their chapter titles and basic content are essentially identical. They are organized in a manner that makes the pattern of the war accessible to student readers and they are well written. In addition to the points made above, three basic elements differentiate them: Lyons contains numerous illustrations, Parker a few, and Stokesbury and Lee none; Lyons has many helpful maps, Parker and Lee a baker's dozen but they are not very useful, and Stokesbury few; and Lyons costs a pricey \$34 to Parker's and Stokesbury's \$9.95. Lee falls in the middle range at \$15.95. When I taught my course in the spring of 1989, Parker and Lee were not yet available and I selected Stokesbury largely on the basis of cost. Of course, it also gave me a coherent, narrative military history as a solid foundation for the course and enough space to use the other resources essential to moving closer to my goal of the total history of warfare.¹⁴ I was pleased with the choice and students endorsed it as well. On a scale from 1 (Excellent) to 5 (Poor) the book earned a 1.54. If one student commented that Stokesbury was "a bit too factual-dry," another found that it "was easy to read and follow—helped alot since I'd never taken a history class on WW II before."

In preparing to teach the course for a second time I would not automatically reorder Stokesbury, as Parker merits a careful look and the foremost military historian of our time, John Keegan, has given us the fruits of his long study in *The Second World War*. Combining the erudition of the military educator with a prose style honed by his work in journalism, Keegan brilliantly presents the strategic and operational events of the war. His incisive analyses of key battles are enlivened and enriched by the telling anecdote or vivid example, often—as appropriate for the author of *The Face of Battle*—reflecting the perspectives of those who directly experienced battle.¹⁵ The work is balanced in terms of its attention to all the major theaters of operations but does not attempt to be comprehensive. As Keegan notes,

¹⁴ The other books used in the course were A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Atheneum 1983); Marc Bloch, *The Strange Defeat* (New York: Norton, 1968); Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of WW II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Ronald Lewin, *Hitler's Mistakes* (New York: William Morrow, 1987); Marie Vassiltschikov, *Berlin Diaries, Nineteen Forty to Forty-Five* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews* (New York: Bantam, 1986); and John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1989).

¹⁵ This element is frequently missing from other shorter histories of the war as authors conserve space by focusing on battle from a grand strategic and operational perspective far removed from the combat experience of the soldier.

No attempt to relate its causes, course and consequences in the space of a single volume can fully succeed. Rather than narrate it as a continuous sequence of events, therefore, I decided from the outset to divide the story of the war into four topics - narrative, strategic analysis, battle piece and 'theme of war' and to use these four topics to carry forward the history of the six main sections into which the war falls. . . .¹⁶

Keegan uses his battle pieces to illustrate the different types of warfare central to this global struggle. While there is certainly room to debate his choices, his elegantly produced and reasonably priced volume has much to commend it.¹⁷ Along with its quality, the book's reasonable length allows the instructor to compensate with other materials for the lack of attention to the social dimensions of the war or to the Holocaust.

I selected Stokesbury as my text in 1989 with a view to presenting a substantial dose of military history to the students as well as examining causes and consequences of WW II. Although I believe I carried through on my "warfare-and-society" approach in the development of my syllabus, I still found it necessary to devote nine out of the twenty-seven lecture classes to rather traditional military history. Despite stating in my course description that "the course is not a military history of the war" (I deliberately sought to protect myself from the student war-buff), in its implementation I ultimately recognized that a course on the Second World War just could not leave the war (military history) out of the classroom. Three primary reasons account for the inclusion of this material. First, key aspects of the military history were just too significant to an understanding of the war to be left out of classroom consideration. Second, the discussion of military history provided an advantageous narrative structure for the course. Third, my students and I found this material to be intrinsically stimulating.

In the end, judging from student comments on their course evaluations, my choices appeared the right ones. I present some sample responses from an open-ended question asking them to evaluate the course:

One of my favorites. Extremely interesting and I would recommending keeping it one the course offerings.

Extremely interesting and in depth—I definitely recommend it be offered again.

¹⁶ Keegan, *Second World War*, 5. Keegan employs the "theme of war" to discuss such issues as war production and supply, espionage, resistance, and superweapons.

¹⁷ Paul Kennedy, for example, in his review asks, "Should the 1941 Battle of Crete (chosen to illustrate the limitations of using airborne troops) really have more space than the 1942-43 Battle of Stalingrad? Could the fateful cruise of the German battleship *Bismarck* not be given more than a sentence? Does the Battle of Imphal in the India-Burma campaign in 1944 deserve so little, and the Battle of Falaise Gap in France that same year so much?" *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 31, 1989, 10.

An interesting analysis of the major happenings of the time. I felt that it covered all the main aspects of the war as well as some lesser things that I had never really thought about before. In all the course is well focused and one of the better ones I have taken.

The course was my favorite one yet.

I enjoyed the course a great deal. The subject was interesting and presented clearly and well. I learned a good deal of specific, detailed information.

The course was thorough and although I would have preferred to examine the material in a more strategic/military way, I can understand that this was not the emphasis of the course.

Given these responses and the fascinating issues and materials with which the student of WW II deals—and I certainly include myself in this student category—I am looking forward to wrestling again with how to strike the balance between the military and total history of this war.