

**RECASTING WORLD WAR II:  
USING ORAL HISTORIES TO UNDERSTAND THE "GREATER WAR"**

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Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990). Pp. xix, 223. \$24.95.

Sherna B. Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987). Pp. xiii, 282. \$22.95.

Corinne Azen Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters: Oral Histories of Three Generations of Ethnic American Women* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991). Pp. xiv, 231. \$24.95.

Rhoda G. Lewin, editor, *Witnesses to the Holocaust: An Oral History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990). Pp. xxii, 241. Paper, \$12.95.

Richard M. Stannard, *Infantry: An Oral History of a World War II American Infantry Battalion* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1993). Pp. xviii, 318. Paper, \$14.95.

As we observe the fiftieth anniversary of the close of World War II, historians and popular authors are churning out countless books about the war and the men and women whose lives were shaped and sometimes changed unalterably by this "greater war" of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> These studies run from biographies and psychological inquiries to diplomatic and military histories of key moments in the war to full-scale studies of the conflict in Europe and the Pacific. They surely will change the way we think about the world of the 1930s and 1940s and the way we teach World War II.

**A BRIEF LOOK AT SOME OF THE NEW BOOKS ON WORLD WAR II**

Whenever we discuss or teach about World War II, we pay considerable attention to the great battles and the turning points of the war, spanning events from Japan's attack on China in 1937 and Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 to the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan that closed the war. But perhaps no moment stands out so clearly in the history of the "greater war" as the opening of the second front in western Europe in June 1944. The story of Operation Overlord has been told many times, but never better than by Stephen E. Ambrose in his pathbreaking study, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II*.<sup>2</sup> For Ambrose, who has given us great histories and biographies over the years, this masterwork is—by his own unabashed

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<sup>1</sup> World War I often is labeled the "Great War." World War II was unquestionably the "greater war," owing to the scope of the conflict, the number of countries involved in all corners of the globe, the millions of lives lost, the expanse of new technologies, and the horrors of the Holocaust.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (Simon & Schuster, 1994).

acknowledgement—"in its essence . . . a love song to democracy" (10). This is the story of the great battle to turn World War II in Europe, but it is also the personal story of the citizen-soldiers who fought and died to reclaim Hitler's Fortress Europe for the western allies.

*D-Day* is based largely on more than 1300 personal accounts from veterans of the Normandy invasion, collected over the past decade by the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans. Ambrose has blended traditional sources with these oral histories to create a seamless narrative. His main players run from generals such as Dwight Eisenhower and Erwin Rommel to the British and American soldiers and officers who dropped behind German lines or stormed the beaches along the French coast. A series of excellent maps, especially fine maps of Utah and Omaha beaches, and two photo essays running a total of 32 pages join with the narrative to produce what will surely become the standard work on D-Day.

Popular historian William B. Breuer has written extensively on World War II for more than a decade, looking at the war from both the Allied and Axis sides. In his latest offering, *Hoodwinking Hitler: The Normandy Deception*, Breuer describes an elaborate Allied ruse known as Plan Bodyguard that was designed to "hoodwink" the Führer and his military planners on the opening of the second front in western Europe.<sup>3</sup> Breuer uses the headpiece of his book to quote British Prime Minister Winston Churchill: "There is required for the composition of a great commander not only massive common sense and reasoning power, but also an element of legerdemain, an original and sinister touch, which leaves the enemy puzzled as well as beaten." This concept of puzzling the enemy defined Plan Bodyguard that was intended to deceive Germany on the time and location for the cross-channel invasion of France. This is an old story dressed up in a new style, with eight maps and an eighteen-page photo essay enhancing the value for anyone interested in an important behind-the-scenes episode of World War II.

Edward J. Drea describes American intelligence operations in the Pacific theater in *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942-1945*.<sup>4</sup> Focusing primarily on codebreaking in the Southwest Pacific, Drea catalogs the successes and failures of this work that was critical to General Douglas MacArthur's efforts to reclaim the Pacific for the Allies. He argues that ULTRA helped the Allies win battles, saved lives, and shortened the Pacific war by six to ten months. In one of the most interesting sections of *MacArthur's ULTRA*, Drea contends that ULTRA was important to President Harry Truman and his aides in the decision to use atomic bombs against

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<sup>3</sup> William B. Breuer, *Hoodwinking Hitler: The Normandy Deception* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur's ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992). See Loren Pennington's review of *MacArthur's ULTRA* in *Teaching History*, 19 (Spring 1994), 35.

Japan. Drea's study is a welcome complement to the wealth of books on intelligence and codebreaking in the European theater of the war.<sup>5</sup>

In *Hitler Slept Late and Other Blunders That Cost Him the War*, James P. Duffy runs through an interesting list of errors that, it can be argued, help explain Germany's losing World War II.<sup>6</sup> Duffy identifies two major mistakes: Hitler's inability to design a long-range military plan and his unyielding belief in the strength of his own will. Then he breaks these principal charges into a series of chronological episodes. Among several arguments, Duffy suggests that Hitler erred by misreading British and French resolve to defend Poland's territorial integrity, by allowing British troops to escape at Dunkirk, by attacking the Soviet Union before defeating Great Britain, and by declaring war on the United States after Japan's attack at Pearl Harbor.

Historians produce few grand narrative histories any more. But for the annals of World War II, there is now a remarkable and welcome exception. Building upon a lifetime of research to produce a master work, Gerhard L. Weinberg of the University of North Carolina offers *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*.<sup>7</sup> Weinberg sets the tone for his book in the first lines of the preface, citing a memorial inscription for British soldiers who died in a little known battle in India in 1944 (xiii):

When you go home  
Tell them of us, and say:  
For your tomorrow,  
We gave our today.

*A World at Arms* memorializes all of the young soldiers, sailors, and marines, who gave all of each day and all of their tomorrows or at the minimum several years of their lives to turn back the Axis tide. Weinberg is true to them, looking at this greater war from a global perspective, eschewing a traditional approach that might emphasize "parochial perspectives" or look at different geographical regions "as if one were an appendage of another" (xiv).

*A World at Arms* truly is grand history. With text that runs beyond 900 pages, it might be too daunting for many classrooms. But Weinberg's commitment to his global focus, his careful attention to detail, his full bibliographic essay, and 23 excellent maps (together at the end of the book) make this an indispensable resource for an historian wanting to know anything about World War II. For this and for future generations of historians, this will be the standard place to start studying the "greater war."

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<sup>5</sup> A useful companion to Drea's book would be F. H. Hinsley and Alan Stripp, editors, *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Also see the documentary, "The Codebreakers," produced for the PBS "Nova" series. This video gives us faces to match the names and places critical to breaking Japanese military and diplomatic codes, while also covering codebreaking activities for the war in Europe.

<sup>6</sup> James P. Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late and Other Blunders That Cost Him the War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991). See William Scott Igo's review of *Hitler Slept Late* in *Teaching History*, 18 (Spring 1993), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

All of these narrative histories add to our understanding of World War II.<sup>8</sup> We become better acquainted with the "great men" of the war. We learn about Allied efforts to dupe the Axis powers by creating bogus scenarios for the opening of the second front. We see the importance of people behind the scenes, notably the codebreakers, in altering the course of the war. We are reminded again that Hitler's personal quirks and blunders helped the Allies to turn the tide at significant moments in the conflict. All of these works certainly merit our attention. But we can gain even richer insights and a deeper understanding of World War II if we turn to the wealth of oral histories that have appeared in recent years.

When he published *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* in 1984, Studs Terkel broke open new ground for historians.<sup>9</sup> Terkel's commitment to going beyond the contributions of "great men" accented the developing emphasis among historians to look at history from the bottom up. Since *"The Good War"* appeared, several other important oral histories of World War II have been collected and published, many of them in the Oral History Series from Twayne Publishers of Boston. These works explore the "underside" of the war by moving us beyond the generals, the political leaders, and the major battles. These personal reflections and testimonies can open our eyes and minds to the role of American women, ethnic minorities, and other groups that sometimes get neglected, such as the common foot soldier on the battlefields, whose lives were intertwined with the war both at home and overseas. Their stories will give us a broader list of characters and force us to recast the war in our teaching and our writings.

### GRANDMOTHERS MOTHERS, AND DAUGHTERS

In *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters*, Corinne Azen Krause surveys the lives of three generations of ethnic women in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.<sup>10</sup> Her collection of oral histories focuses on eighteen women of Italian, Jewish, and Slavic background, whose lives tell a mix of stories about history and world events, immigration and assimilation, urban society and culture, gender and ethnicity. These are three distinct generations of American women: the grandmothers who were part of the great rush of immigration from Europe to America around the turn of the twentieth century, the mothers whose lives were shaped by depression and war, and the daughters who came of age in Cold War America.

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to these several books, many fine short works specifically designed for the classroom have appeared in the last two years. For example: Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Earl R. Beck, *The European Home Fronts, 1939-1945* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1993); Michael J. Lyons, *World War II: A Short History*, second edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994); and Alan F. Wilt, *Nazi Germany* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1994). For a useful survey of military histories of World War II, see Donald G. Schilling, "How Much War Should Be Included in a Course on World War II," *Teaching History*, 18 (Spring 1993), 14-21.

<sup>9</sup> Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> For an individual review of *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters*, see the review by Terry Brown in *Teaching History*, 18 (Fall 1993), 92.

The mothers, the second of these three generations, were marked indelibly by the second world war. First their ancestral lands and then their homeland plunged into the "greater war," with lasting impact on the world and on these women. As Krause suggests, "Wartime experience broadened horizons and gave to women a vision of change and of choice" (3).

Lydia Pofi, at age nineteen, married a second lieutenant in the air corps, who like her was Italian in heritage. She followed him from camp to camp, often enduring uncomfortable conditions, until he was ordered overseas. Through the last two years of the war she lived constantly with worry about his safety. He survived the war physically, but the war destroyed him emotionally. "When he came home, he was a total stranger to me," Lydia remembered. "He had moods, and I imagine it was depression. He had nightmares and would wake up screaming." But even counseling would not open him to his wife: "He will not talk about the war" (64). At a later time, in the era of the Vietnam war, these kinds of postwar problems for veterans came to be understood better and to be identified as post-traumatic shock disorder (PTSD). But after World War II, families tried to live with their troubled sons and husbands without really knowing what had caused the changes or understanding how to cope with them.

Looking at World War II through the lives of the Jewish women in *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters* is sadly disappointing. For Naomi Cohen, World War II was both a frightening and enriching experience. She recalled the fright of blackouts and air-raid drills, the hysteria and terror of seeing her twin sister in bandages during a mock drill. She looked more fondly on her work as a nurse's aid in Washington D.C. during the war. But her oral history does not include any references to what it meant to be Jewish in the United States during the war or to the horrors that European Jews suffered under Hitler. The narrative from Belle Stock, the other second generation Jewish woman in this collection of oral histories, strangely does not contain any insightful thoughts on the war. Belle's mother, Eva Rubenstein Dizenfeld, noted that World War II meant "hard years" for the family (119), but Belle simply states that her husband spent five years in the army.

The reflections of Slavic women in this collection also fall short in helping us get a better understanding of World War II, except for Eva Carey's brief acknowledgement that for her and other women doctors "World War II made the difference" (190). These unfortunate gaps in several of these oral histories—despite editor Krause's suggestion that "World War II was the pivotal event that shaped the lives of the second generation" (3)—lessen the value of *Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters* for a fuller understanding of American women in World War II. But the saving grace is that we still have Lydia Pofi's reminiscences of her husband's bouts with PTSD. Her story introduces an important issue that deserves inclusion in our teaching about World War II.

### ROSIE THE RIVETER

Without question the most enduring image of American women from World War II is the cartoon-like character called "Rosie the Riveter," who smiled down from propaganda posters to encourage women to join in the battle for democracy. In fact,

many American women became real-life Rosie's during the war. They entered the job force by the millions as American men packed their duffel and sea bags for service in Europe and the Pacific, leaving behind work in factories and munitions plants that was critical to the war effort. Many women welcomed this chance to do their part, changing from low-paying positions in retail, secretarial, and service work or leaving the home for work as riveters, steelworkers, and welders in defense plants.<sup>11</sup>

Government and industry propaganda campaigns played on a several themes, including economic opportunity and patriotism, to draw women to work. An advertisement in Seattle trumpeted the skills of wives and mothers: ". . . an American homemaker with the strength and ability to run a house and raise a family . . . has the strength and ability to take her place in a vital War industry."<sup>12</sup> In all corners of the country women responded eagerly to these appeals and became active players in the work of war.

In *Rosie the Riveter: Women, the War, and Social Change*, Sherna B. Gluck provides an opportunity for ten Rosie's to tell about their lives and, most importantly for us, to describe their wartime work in the southern California aircraft industry. Gluck collected interviews with 44 women as part of an on-going oral history program called the Rosie the Riveter Revisited Project at California State University, Long Beach. The women came from all sorts of backgrounds—Anglo, African American, and Hispanic, single, separated, and married, students and homemakers—but they all became real-life Rosie's during World War II. Their stories expand our knowledge of women at work during the war, but they also help us to understand the dramatic social and economic changes that were just beginning for women in the United States.

The reasons for going to work in the defense industry were varied for these ten women. Margarita Salazar McSweyn wanted to "make more money . . . and the money was in defense" (85); for Betty Jeanne Boggs "it was something to do" (111); Helen Studer's family "needed the money" (186), but she also wanted to show support for her son who was in military service. For all of these reasons and more, they went to work for Douglas and Lockheed and North American Aviation. They often battled resentment from the men in the plants, and they sometimes endured discrimination when the managers favored men or other women who were "young and beautiful" (187). After the war, some stayed on the job, while others went back home. But they all knew that they had "accomplished quite a feat" (192).

*Rosie the Riveter* was the first of these oral histories in the Twayne series—published in 1987—but it is still one of the best of the bunch. World War II played a critical part in transforming the role and status of women in American society. The war opened new positions for women in the workplace, especially in areas that

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<sup>11</sup> On the changing roles of women during World War II, see Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), Susan M. Hartman, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), and D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1986), 50.

had been closed to them. They stayed true to tradition by maintaining a commitment to home and to family, but they embraced new opportunities that the war presented. In this way, they set themselves and their daughters on the path toward equal rights. The ten women profiled in *Rosie the Riveter* reflect this mix of old and new, and they offer great insight and character for us to share with our students.

### THE UNKNOWN INTERNMENT

In the aftermath of Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the American people, especially along the Pacific coast, struck out at enemy aliens within the United States. Even before American forces flooded the European and Pacific theaters of operations, the American citizenry were looking for hidden enemies in their midst, convinced that subversives were working to undermine the nation's defenses and to pave the way for an Axis victory. By mid February 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt conceded to the mounting pressures of public opinion and the mistaken findings of the Roberts Commission that Japanese fifth columnists had facilitated the Pearl Harbor disaster, and he issued Executive Order 9066, allowing the Secretary of War or designated representatives to establish military areas "from which any or all persons may be excluded."<sup>13</sup> The expectation from Americans interested in restricting the actions and freedoms of enemy aliens was that this policy of exclusion from military areas would apply German, Italian, and Japanese aliens alike.<sup>14</sup> But, in fact, after an early rush to include Germans and Italians, the government applied these restrictions only to Japanese and Japanese-Americans.

The story of Japanese relocation and internment is standard stuff in American history textbooks and studies of World War II. The tragedy of Japanese relocation to internment camps has inspired a rich scholarship.<sup>15</sup> But the concurrent effort to apply Executive Order 9066 to Germans and Italians living in the United States is less known, if acknowledged at all. In *The Unknown Internment*, Stephen Fox has unveiled the story of Italian internment during World War II by drawing upon a mix of government documents, newspaper articles, and interviews with relocated aliens or their surviving family members.<sup>16</sup> The geographic focus is the California coast region from Humboldt Bay in the northernmost part of the state to Monterey Bay in midstate.

In the early stages of *The Unknown Internment*, Fox traces the roots of Italian immigration to the United States and the hope of many of these newcomers that they might share in the American dream. He also describes the pressure immigrants felt

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<sup>13</sup> For the full text of Executive Order 9066, see Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans during World War II* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 41.

<sup>15</sup> The foremost scholar of Japanese internment is Roger Daniels who has published such works as *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) and *Prisoners Without Trial* (cited above).

<sup>16</sup> For an individual review of *The Unknown Internment*, see the review by Brian Boland in *Teaching History*, 19 (Spring 1994), 33-34.

from the Italian government to remain faithful to Italy, reminding them "that space and time placed no limit on their loyalty to the homeland" (7). Because many first-generation Italians shunned naturalization, they fell easy prey to angry Americans who suspected every alien from an Axis state of harboring continuing affection for the homeland and enmity toward the United States. The children admitted that immigrant parents had "great admiration for Mussolini" and became "irate when there was a war with Italy." But unlike nativists who wanted restrictions, the children knew that their fathers and mothers "never wanted to go back to Italy," and in fact they had severed all ties to Italy (32). Certainly they knew that their parents did not threaten to become Fascist fifth columnists.

Pressure from the political leadership and citizenry of California convinced the War Department that all Axis aliens were dangerous to American security and led to Italians and Germans, as well as Japanese, being ordered out of specific areas along the Pacific coast by late February 1942. The consequences for Italians living along the coast was profound and lasting. In Pittsburg, California, some 3000 Italians, one-third of the town's population, were identified for relocation; the same number was forced out of the area around Monterey Bay. All along the northern coast of California, Italians were sent packing. After years in the United States, after sending their sons into military service to defend the country, the orders came to leave their homes. As Nida Vanni of Arcata suggested, "It was crazy . . . crazy . . . Well [government officials] didn't care then. In those days the law was so strict" (64-65).

In less than one year the government retreated from its knee-jerk policy of relocating Italian aliens. Several factors forced the change. Enforcement would have required herculean efforts far beyond the economic and political capacity of domestic authorities; Italians and Italian-Americans composed a good portion of the country's population, notably in major cities such as New York City and Chicago. Officials also feared that enforcement would endanger the war effort and engender major postwar problems. As the Tolan Committee from the U.S. House of Representatives reported as early as March 1942: "It was unthinkable that we should treat this matter lightly" (125). President Roosevelt removed Italians from the list of enemy aliens on Columbus Day in 1942, less than eight months after authorizing Executive Order 9066.

The policy of relocating Italian aliens was short-lived, but the effects lingered for those who suffered the indignity and abuse of evacuation. Mary Cardinalli spoke for many of them: "It does change your life. It's always on your mind. You think about it, that you missed a lot of your life. . . . Yeah, it was really something" (181).

*The Unknown Internment* gives close examination—through the words of the participants—to a little known part of one of the darkest chapters in American history, the evacuation and relocation of immigrant aliens and their American-born children in the early heat and nativist hysteria of World War II. This fine oral history sets out the story of Italian aliens who now should stand alongside Japanese and Japanese-American evacuees in our knowledge and understanding of the "greater war."

## INFANTRY

When people talk about war from the bottom up—which today is a popular way to do any history—the men in the infantry, the common foot soldiers, become the center of the story. In World War II American soldiers and marines tramped their way



through Europe and the Pacific to break down the great military machines that Germany and Japan had built to control the world. They really were the vanguard of democracy—ordinary men and boys asked by their country to perform extraordinary feats. They were sons and fathers, students and teachers, skilled machinists and farm hands, all called to serve in the military. Richard M. Stannard was one of them, drafted at eighteen to become a rifleman in the Second Battalion of the 410th Infantry Regiment, 103rd Division. In *Infantry: An Oral History of a World War II American Infantry Battalion*, Stannard has collected the memories of his comrades from three rifle companies and a fourth company that provided heavy weapons support, and he has added depth and texture to our knowledge of living under fire on the front lines of the world war in Europe.

The men of these rifle companies entered the service with great anticipation and confidence. They were like Paul Fussell, a second lieutenant in F Company: "I was young, I was athletic, I was stupid, I was very gung ho . . . It never entered my mind that I was entering perhaps the most hazardous job in the whole army" (xiii).<sup>17</sup> Some of the young men fell victim to the dangers of war. A few came under fire from their own side: "You haven't lived until you've had your own artillery on you" (278). Leo Lowenberger, a gunner in a mortar squad, lost a leg to a shell fragment: "I thought all I had was a broken leg," he recalled about the shock of the incident" (21). Some became prisoners of war, although, as Woody Woodbeck reflected, "How to surrender was not part of our training" (31). Many of them and their families bore the wounds of war long after 1945. Jack Reeder, for example, suffered personal as well as physical harm: "I think that what happened to me may have had a negative effect on my marriage. My injuries limited my physical activity, of course. I could not hike or camp out with the boys" (211). Doris Kopko Barry, whose brother was the first casualty in the Second Battalion, never got over her loss: "She didn't want her own son to go to war [in Vietnam]," her husband remarked. "She was very antiwar, very vocal about Vietnam" (5).

To bring these long-time memories back to life, Stannard let his fellow soldiers and their families tell all the stories, from heroism to misconduct, from reflections about basic training to thoughts about the atomic bombing of Japan. Sometimes the language is plain, sometimes it is bald and blunt, always it is real. *Infantry* provides true life tales along the front lines of World War II, to expand and enrich our understanding of the war, of young men under fire, and of the consequences for them and for their friends and families.

## WITNESSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

In the context of the whole twentieth century, World War II truly is the greater war by almost every standard of judgment: the geographic breadth of the conflict, the number of countries involved, the destructive power of new weaponry, the length of casualty lists, the social, economic, and geopolitical implications, and the number of

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<sup>17</sup> Fussell has also contributed significantly to our understanding of war and its impact on people and nations, notably with *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) and *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

lives taken in death camps when Hitler and his Nazi henchmen implemented "The Final Solution." Hitler and the Holocaust have become topical issues in the 1990s, covered in films and documentaries and in books that plumb the darkest recesses of Nazi Germany. Several lessons come from all of these investigations of the Holocaust, the most important being two: "Remember" and "Never Again."

In *Witnesses to the Holocaust: An Oral History*, Rhoda G. Lewin has added some depth and dimension to the emotions we feel when we talk and write and think about the Holocaust, or about the enormity of Hitler's hatred for the Jewish people, or about the unwillingness of people during the war to admit or acknowledge the existence of death camps.<sup>18</sup> *Witnesses to the Holocaust* is tough stuff for any reader, even for people who have a good store of knowledge about the Final Solution. But Lewin's intention is not to depress or discourage us. It is meant to "enrich our lives" (xiii) and to illuminate "the human dimension of an event unparalleled in human history" (xx). For Lewin and these direct witnesses to history another critical purpose is to educate us.<sup>19</sup>

Gathered together in this remarkable collection of oral histories are the stories of 44 survivors (plus two Polish Catholics who helped save friends) and fourteen American liberators, all now living in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Their histories cover the geography of Europe: Germany and Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia, Latvia and Lithuania, Romania and Greece. Some were in labor camps, others in death camps. The commonality of their experiences is that they all survived somehow and lived to tell their stories.

For some of the survivors, such as Fred Wildauer, there are continuing nightmares: "In the middle of winter I sometimes walk out at night and I'm alone and it's quiet and I am back in the ghetto, the wind blowing, the dreary, hopeless feeling, and it comes to me right there, the memory—that night that I heard the shots, that night my family died" (92). For some there is lingering guilt, even now fifty years after the war: "For 2,000 years the Jewish people dreamed of returning to their land, and I'm sitting here [in the United States]. I try to make it up by giving money, but it's not enough. I really should be in Israel," laments Mark Mandel (156). For some survivors such as Felix Kaminsky, who ended up working for Oskar Schindler, going home to Poland after the war proved impossible, because his homeland—with all of the labor and death camps—had become a "bloody, bloody land for me" (141).

For these men and women who survived the horrors, there are critical lessons to share with us all. David Eiger, for example, took from his experiences in forced labor camps the realization that "you cannot hate a group as a group because hate breeds hate" (23). Max Grosblat believed "even as a kid that I got to fight for my rights, to fight when nobody else will. You should fight for what you believe in" (137). Dora

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<sup>18</sup> On this last point, an important resource for the classroom is the 1994 documentary "America and the Holocaust," shown on PBS as part of "The American Experience" series. The program investigates disturbing suggestions that the U.S. Department of State slammed the American door in the face of Jews who wanted to escape Europe during World War II.

<sup>19</sup> One of the interesting and important parts of *Witnesses to the Holocaust*, beyond the oral histories of the survivors and their liberators, is an eight-page "Guide for Teachers and Discussion Leaders" (229-236) that provides useful ideas for the classroom and out-of-class projects.

Zaidenweber frequently shares her story with student and adult groups, telling "about people who would treat other human beings this way, how any group can become a victim, how the rest of the world turned away and pretended it wasn't happening. They didn't want to get involved." For her, this is "the lesson of the Holocaust" (100).

For those too young to have known World War II or too far away to have witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust, these survivors and liberators help us to see through their eyes, and now to feel through their words, what Hitler and his followers meant by their Final Solution to the "Jewish problem." *Witnesses to the Holocaust* is a powerful piece of history. Add to it complementary selections from others who experienced the camps, notably Elie Wiesel, and mix in some video materials, and this horrific slice of World War II will stay in mind and memory forever.<sup>20</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Oral histories will never replace traditional narrative histories completely. But, as these several oral histories of World War II show, they provide an important complement to the stories historians piece together from government archives and manuscript collections. Good oral histories provide depth and texture; they personalize the actions of history by putting real people and personal reflections with the names, dates, and places that are the dry stuff of history. A recent book on oral history put it well: "A great variety of topics can be explored by the use of oral history . . . it is the life experiences of ordinary men and women . . . Personal testimonies give a new dimension to our understanding of the past."<sup>21</sup> Oral histories such as *Rosie the Riveter*, *Infantry*, and *Witnesses to the Holocaust* provide important insight into the life experiences of ordinary men and women in extraordinary times and they add substantially to our understanding of the "greater war."

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<sup>20</sup> See Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982; originally published in French in 1958). Wiesel, the foremost chronicler of the Holocaust, received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986, in large part for his steadfast efforts to keep the Holocaust alive in people's minds and memories.

<sup>21</sup> David Hey, editorial preface, to Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (London: Longman, 1994), ix.