Suggestions for Further Reading

to accompany

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The Best War Ever

Second Edition

THIS ESSAY is not intended as an exhaustive discussion of every noteworthy work on World War II. Instead, it seeks to provide the reader with a guide to some of the sources I found most useful in writing the text and to give students and general readers a list of volumes for further study that are well written, informative, and provocative. At times, there are too few authorities on a subject to allow for this kind of selectivity.

one

No Easy Answers


The idea that monolithic dictatorships were in a worldwide conspiracy was stated clearly in a series of films called *Why We Fight*, made for the U.S. War Department by Frank Capra. The first episode, *Prelude to War* (1943), makes graphic use of the Tanaka memorandum. It is available in video format. The arguments for and against appeasement are laid out in Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint, and John Pritchard, *Total War: The Causes and Courses of the Second World War* (rev. 2d. ed., 1989). This is particularly helpful in showing the impact of Japanese actions on British policy. Good companion studies are P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (1986), and Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (1987). Defense problems facing the British Empire were analyzed comprehensively in Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (1972).


Alan Cassel’s *Fascism* (1975) explored the nature of fascism in different countries. Denis Mack Smith studied the Italian dictator in *Mussolini* (1981). See also his examination of fascist imperial designs in *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (1976). Other biographies include Ivone


John Toland’s two-volume *Adolf Hitler* (1976) is a well-balanced biography. Toland avoids demonizing Hitler and makes the Nazi era intelligible. Other useful biographies include Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1964), and Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (1973). Fest profiled top Nazi leaders in *The Face of the Third Reich* (1970). Albert Speer’s *Inside the Third Reich* (1970), the memoir of an official close to Hitler, also provides views of the Nazi inner circle. Hitler’s own book, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) (1925; Eng. trans., 1943), is often characterized as dense and muddled, yet it is quite easy to grasp Hitler’s fundamental viewpoint by browsing in the text. Good examples of the many attempts to see Hitler from a psychological standpoint are the pioneering work by Dr. Walter C. Langer, written in 1943 for American intelligence and

Erich Maria Remarque’s antiwar novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Eng. trans., 1928), was one of the many books banned in Nazi Germany. The excellent American film version (1930) was also prohibited in Germany for a time. Remarque’s later novel, *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (Eng. trans., 1954), is a first-rate love story as well as a graphic picture of existence under Hitler. Bernt Englelmann’s *In Hitler’s Germany: Daily Life in the Third Reich* (1986) is a good oral history that gives a variety of German reactions to nazism. Robert E. Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won: Goebbels and the Nazi Media Campaign* (1986), analyzes propaganda. In 1934, Leni Riefenstahl filmed the annual Nazi party rally at Nuremberg. Her movie *Triumph of the Will* (1935) is a tour de force of media-staged pageantry and is excellent for understanding the role of symbols and imagery in nazism’s appeal. H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development, 1922–1945* (1976), examines the party’s attraction for young people.


Two fine writers observed life in the Reich and left critical accounts. One is by American reporter William L. Shirer and is titled *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1939–1941* (1941). The other is *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) by English novelist Christopher Isherwood. His writings were the basis for Bob Fosse’s popular film *Cabaret* (1972). Shirer’s two-volume history, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1959), though somewhat dated in perspective, still has useful insights.


two

The Patterns of War, 1939–1945


### three
**The American War Machine**


The best collection of primary-source data—interviews and surveys—for analyzing GI life is the mine of information put together by the research team headed by Samuel A. Stouffer and published under his name as *The American Soldier, volume 1, Adjustment During Army Life,* and


Examples of American discipline and leadership faltering during captivity are found in John M. Wright, Jr., *Captured on Corregidor: Diary of an American “P.O.W in World War II* (1988), William R. Cubbins, *The War of the Cottontails: A Bomber Pilot with the Fifteenth Air Force Against Nazi Germany* (1989), and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five or the Children’s Crusade* (1969), which has a scathingly funny critique of the different American and British
behavior patterns under the pressure of captivity. Military “chickenshit” is described in Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989). Chickenshit destroys an enlisted man in Robert Lowry’s novel *Casualty* (1946), where the protagonist deserts and is killed after being busted for standing a drunken man’s guard duty. “What had happened to him was just some more of the meaningless discipline that was a thing to be endured” (132).


the humanities, suspect as effeminate) is ruined after making a sexual advance toward a marine officer on leave.


### four Overseas


War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians (1969; repr. 1982), deals with the difficulties of flying in an inhospitable region.


five

Home Front Change


The dislocation caused by wartime change is analyzed in John Costello, Virtue Under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes (1985), and Francis Merrill, The War and Social Problems on the Home Front (1948). On population movement, see Henry S.


experience in the war. After growing up in integrated neighborhoods, Kikuchi was interned before enlisting in the army. Students might want to see the evocative movie interpretation, *Come See the Paradise* (1990), available on video disk. The plight of hispanics in the Depression and war eras is well covered in Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation and in the 1930s* (1995).


Two foreign visitors who made acute observations on the tenor of American life in the period were Geoffrey Gorer, *The Americans: A Study in National Character* (1948), and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Wartime Writings, 1939–1944* (1986). For the Depression’s impact on family life and the war generation, see Glen H. Elder, Jr., *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change*


of soldiers and civilians in occupied Naples. Graham Greene’s novel *The Third Man* (1949) was made into a fine film starring Orson Welles.

A typical example of a WWII assassination is described in Callum MacDonald, *The Killing of SS Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich* (1989). Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem, *The Murder of Lidice* (1942), dehumanizes Heydrich as a werewolf who “howls in his tomb . . . And scratches the earth from his grave away.” The American killing of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto in 1943, though controversial at the time, similarly pointed the way to postwar covert operations. William Casey is a good example of an OSS officer who continued a career in covert operations after the war. He became head of the CIA and was involved in Iran-contra, dying just as that episode became public; see his *The Secret War Against Hitler* (1988).


My profile of veterans’ adjustment problems and the statistics behind the occurrence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of different wars is based on the work of a West Point graduate, combat veteran, and military advisor to the federal government, Nate Pelletier. He gave an insightful lecture, “Combat Warriors to Veteran Leaders: A Historic Comparison of Three War Generations’ Societal Reintegration,” at Northern Kentucky University on November


On the G.I. Bill, see Richard Severo and Lewis Milford, *The Wages of War: When America’s Soldiers Came Home* (1990), and Dixon Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (1944; repr. 1970). Other sources cited in the text are David R. Segal, *Recruiting for Uncle Sam: Citizenship and Military Manpower Policy* (1989), and James L. Clayton, “Vietnam: The 200 Year Mortgage,” *The Nation*, May 26, 1969. Contrary to myth, many veterans failed to access the G.I. Bill. For example, some emotionally-damaged ex-combat soldiers found it difficult to stay in school or take advantage of job opportunities. Often, they had made the least progress in education before the war came and so were not prepared to climb further up the ladder as veterans. I discuss this more fully in Michael C. C. Adams, “Who Didn’t Use the GI Bill? Notes on a Lingering Question,” *Studies in American Culture* XXIII: 2 (2000).

seven

The Life Cycle of a Myth


There are many studies of the movie industry during the era. Three sound surveys are


Robert Rodat’s screenplay for *Saving Private Ryan* is available in somewhat modified form in the 1998 book of the same title by Max Allan Collins. Compare an earlier piece by Steven Spielberg, “The Mission,” in his *Amazing Stories* television series aired during the 1985-86 season. Here, Spielberg recreates in harshly realistic detail the worst nightmare of a belly gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress. The ball turret has jammed and the landing gear is shot away. The plane will have to do a belly-flop, pancake landing, squashing the gunner. The whole way home from Germany to England, the trapped gunner is aware of his fate. But, another crew member is an amateur artist and he doodles new candy-cane-striped legs on a sketch of the plane. Miraculously, they appear on the aircraft, which lands safely, with the gunner intact. Fantasy takes the sting out of a horrible combat scenario. To illustrate the difference in viewpoint between Americans and Europeans, consult another small fantasy, a ghost story about a missing bomber crew, *The Greatcoat* (2012), by British author Helen Dunmore. Here, in the cold, bleak
rationed world of wartime England, an RAF bomber crew trying to hang on until the end of their tour, instead die in flames; the lost spirit of one flyer, unable to find peace, haunts the living.

Works which argue that romanticization of the war has hurt American ability to deal realistically with the Holocaust include Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (1995), and Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (2011). I also recommend a particularly arresting novel that stands out for its complexity, suggesting the ramifications of an event like the Holocaust web up all of humanity in the evil: Jenna Blum, *Those Who Save Us* (2004).


To compare how America’s “worst war,” Vietnam, has been treated in popular culture, see Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, *How the War Was Remembered: Hollywood and Vietnam*
comments on how the movie version of World War II inspired them to go to Vietnam as young
men are found in Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), and Bill McCloud, *What Should
We Tell Our Children About Vietnam!* (1989). Poet and social critic Robert Bly directly charges
that the WWII generation of veterans misled the young men coming after them about the nature

More recently, Susan Faludi repeated and broadened the accusation, saying World War II
fathers were unhealthily distanced from their sons in numerous areas. She also believes that
much male nostalgia for “the band of brothers” represents a loss of confidence and certainty in
today’s blue collar community. See Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*
(1999). Tom Mathews gives graphic and deeply moving stories of how damaged personal
relations permanently hurt the lives of World War II fathers and their sons in *Our Fathers’ War:

For a more extended analysis of why the model of the Good War does not fit the nature of
armed conflict in the twenty-first century, Michael C. C. Adams, *Echoes of War: A Thousand
Years of Military History in Popular Culture* (2002), ch. 6, “Innocents at War.” Also helpful
were Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*
Giants* (2013), William Nester, *Haunted Victory: The American Crusade to Destroy Saddam and
Impose Democracy on Iraq* (2012), and Suzanne Simons, *Master of War: Blackwater USA’s Erik
Prince and the Business of War* (2009). The works of army veteran and professor of
International Relations, Andrew J. Bacevich, deserve a special mention. His analyses of
American attitudes towards the world and consequent formation of policies, along with their
flaws, are consistently, readable, well-argued, and illuminating. See, for example, The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced By War (2005), and The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism (2008).

In Echoes of War, I argue that seemingly comic pieces such as Slaughterhouse-Five should be taken seriously as war novels. Vonnegut’s time travel is in fact a creative variation on the vivid flashbacks associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Vonnegut debunks the John Wayne myth of war making men out of boys. I analyze Roger Waters’ thoughts on the death of his father and his critique of post-war society at greater length in Michael C. C. Adams, “Pink Floyd - The Wall, Wartime Loss, and Community Values,” The Journal of Kentucky Studies, XIV (September 1997).