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Is World War II Still ‘the Good War’?

By ADAM KIRSCH

In February, the last surviving American veteran of the First World War died. It is hard to imagine the day when we say goodbye to the last survivor of the Second World War, so large do the “good war” and the “greatest generation” still loom in the national imagination. But the calendar and the census do not lie. Some 16 million Americans served in the military during World War II. On the 60th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 2001, about 5.5 million were still living. This year, as we prepare to mark the 70th anniversary, the number is closer to 1.5 million, and it drops by almost a thousand a day.

The passage of time doesn’t just turn life into history; it also changes the contours of history itself. Over the last several years, historians, philosophers and others have begun to think about the Second World War in challenging and sometimes disturbing new ways, reflecting the growing distance between the country that fought the war and the country that remembers it. As always when history is debated, the stakes are not just the past but the present and future as well. Even as the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have made Americans less confident about the ways we use our military power, the struggle with the Axis remains the classic example of American might deployed for virtuous ends. President Obama had that history in mind when he explained his decision to intervene in Libya’s civil war: “To brush aside America’s responsibility as a leader and — more profoundly — our responsibilities to our fellow human beings under such circumstances would have been a betrayal of who we are,” Obama said. “Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different.” Even today, World War II helps underwrite our claim to that moral difference.

Americans’ favorite World War II stories have always been about the democratic heroism of ordinary soldiers; this kind of popular history has never disappeared, and probably never will. Laura Hillenbrand’s “Unbroken” (2010), which has resided for months near the top of the best-seller list, tells the story of Louis Zamperini, an ex-track star turned airman, whose plane went down over the Pacific and who survived weeks adrift on a raft and even worse ordeals in a Japanese prison camp. As the title suggests, Zamperini is an untroubling kind of war hero, because his greatness was his refusal to break, not his ability to break others — a part of the soldier’s job that is far less comfortable to read about. Zamperini was a bombardier on a B-24, and at the very time he was being tortured by the Japanese, other bomber crews, made up of men no better or worse than he, carried out “Operation Gomorrah” — the weeklong raid on Hamburg, Germany, that in July 1943 killed some 40,000 civilians and destroyed virtually the entire city. Can we make room for that story, and others like it, in our memory of World War II? And if we do, can we still keep our pride in a “good war”?

Those are the questions being asked by the new wave of World War II histories. These books are not “revisionist,” in the pejorative sense: they don’t suggest a moral equivalence between the Axis and the Allies, or minimize Nazi crimes, or deny the Holocaust. Rather, they are thoughtful works by professional historians, who are less interested in rewriting the facts of the war than in reconsidering their moral implications. Americans who learn about the war in Europe from a book like Stephen Ambrose’s “Band of Brothers” (1992), for instance, could be forgiven for thinking of the defeat of Germany as the work of doughty G.I.’s. Yet in “No Simple Victory: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945” (2007), the British historian Norman Davies begins from the premise that “the war effort of the Western powers” was “something of a sideshow.” America lost 143,000 soldiers in the fight against Germany, Davies points out, while the Soviet Union lost 11 million.

And if the main show was a war between Hitler and Stalin, he wonders, wasn't World War II a clash of nearly equivalent evils? "Anyone genuinely committed to freedom, justice and democracy is duty-bound to condemn both of the great totalitarian systems without fear or favor," he concludes. As a historian of Poland, Davies is especially aware of what few Americans remember: that World War II began with a joint Nazi-Soviet invasion of that country. For the first two years of the war, Hitler and Stalin were allies; the fact that they then turned against each other, when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, doesn't change the moral equation. "If one finds two gangsters fighting each other, it is no valid approach at all to round on one and to lay off the other. The only valid test is whether or not they deserve the label of gangsters."

Davies's deliberately provocative book had a mixed reception, in part because of the way his account of the war in Eastern Europe seemed determined to minimize the importance of the Holocaust. No such objection can be made to Timothy Snyder's morally scrupulous book "Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin" (2010), which also spotlights Eastern Europe — in particular the region comprising the Baltics, Ukraine, Belarus, Western Russia and Poland that Snyder calls "the bloodlands," because they were the greatest killing field of the Second World War. This was the site of the titanic battles between the Wehrmacht and the Red Army: it was also the scene of 14 million noncombatant deaths between 1933 and 1945. This figure encompasses 10 million civilians and prisoners of war killed by the Nazis — including six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust—and four million civilians and P.O.W.'s killed by the Soviets.

By grouping German and Soviet casualties together, Snyder is making an implicit point. The Soviet Union was America's ally, Germany our enemy; but both regimes were guilty of killing millions of people for ideological reasons. Weren't the three million Ukrainians starved by Stalin in 1932-33 deliberate victims of state aggression and ideological terror, no less than the three million Soviet P.O.W.'s starved by Hitler in 1941-42? "Only an unabashed acceptance of the similarities between the Nazi and Soviet systems permits an understanding of their differences," Snyder maintains.

If Stalin stands in our memory as a tyrant equal to Hitler, Winston Churchill is possibly the foreign statesman most beloved by Americans. For this very reason, however, Churchill has been the subject of some of the most impassioned attempts to revise our understanding of the Second World War. The subtext of this debate, and perhaps the main reason for its vehemence, has to do with the outsize symbolic role Churchill came to play in American foreign-policy debates after Sept. 11. When President Bush alluded to Churchill's wartime rhetoric in his address to Congress after the attacks, Norman Podhoretz wrote in "World War IV" (2007) that he "unmistakably and unambiguously placed the war against the 'global terrorist network' in the direct succession to World War II." It was widely reported that Bush kept a bust of Churchill in the Oval Office — and that Obama had it removed.

It is not surprising, then, that historians would start to view Churchill, for good or ill, through the prism of current politics. The conservative historian Paul Johnson, to take one example, wrote a short biography, "Churchill" (2009), whose premise is that "of all the towering figures of the 20th century, both good and evil, Winston Churchill was the most valuable to humanity." At the same time, highly critical accounts of Churchill have proliferated: "Churchill's Folly: How Winston Churchill Created Modern Iraq" (2004), "Blood, Sweat and Arrogance: And the Myths of Churchill's War" (2006). Nonhistorians with political agendas also piled on. The novelist Nicholson Baker wrote a revisionist account of World War II, "Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization" (2008), in which Churchill comes across as rather more responsible for the war than Hitler. Meanwhile, Pat Buchanan wrote "Churchill, Hitler, and 'The Unnecessary War': How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World" (2008), blaming Churchill for taking Britain to war against Germany in the first place. This isolationist lesson was directed, Buchanan explicitly said, at "the Churchill cult" that convinced Bush, "an untutored president," that liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein was akin to liberating Europe from Hitler.

In a period that saw historians like Niall Ferguson recommend the British Empire as a model for the exercise of American

power abroad, the connection between Churchill's imperialism and his racial prejudice became another major problem. It was most thoroughly addressed by Richard Toye in "Churchill's Empire" (2010), which fair-mindedly explored the reasons Churchill's "humanitarianism did not imply a belief in racial equality." Toye often writes admiringly of Churchill, but does not shy away from the ugliness of some of his views — like his confession that "I hate people with slit-eyes and pig-tails," or his nostalgia for the empire's "jolly little wars against barbarous peoples."

More serious than racist remarks is the charge leveled at Churchill in a book by Madhusree Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War: The British Empire and the Ravaging of India During World War II* (Basic Books, \$28.95). Mukerjee lays responsibility for the Bengal famine of 1943, which resulted in the deaths of some three million people, right at Churchill's doorstep. She sharpens her point by drawing provocative analogies between the English and the Nazis. At the height of the famine, she writes, some relief kitchens in Bengal were offering the dying just 400 calories' worth of rice a day, "at the low end of the scale on which, at much the same time, inmates at Buchenwald were being fed."

Critics have challenged Mukerjee's conclusions about the relative shares of culpability for the famine borne by the British, the threat of Japanese invasion, bad weather in Bengal, and hoarding. But "Churchill's Secret War" is convincing on one fundamental point. Churchill refused to divert resources from feeding Britain to feeding India because, true to the logic of imperialism, he placed a far higher value on British lives than on Indian ones. The number of Bengalis who died in 1943 rivals the number of Ukrainians who, as Timothy Snyder shows, were deliberately starved by Stalin in 1932-33. Does this mean that a comparable atrocity must be placed against the moral account of Britain and its Allies in World War II?

Or was the Allies' worst atrocity committed in Europe itself? The horrors of the British and American air raids on German cities have never been a secret; Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" (1969), with its nightmare evocation of the bombing of Dresden, remains one of the most popular American war novels. But American debates on the morality of bombing have traditionally centered on the atomic bomb, a unique weapon that raises unique questions.

What makes new writing about the bombing of Germany especially significant is that it has been driven by the memories of those on the receiving end. In a landmark essay, "Air War and Literature" (published in English in 2003 as a part of "On the Natural History of Destruction"), the German novelist W. G. Sebald wondered why the Allied bombing — which killed half a million civilians and devastated most German cities — "seems to have left scarcely a trace of pain behind in the collective consciousness." A few years later, as if in response, the German historian Jörg Friedrich published "The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945" (2006). Friedrich describes the kinds of scenes that took place on German streets in the aftermath of bombing raids: for instance, "a man dragging a sack with five or six bulges in it as if he were carrying heads of cabbage. It was the heads of his family, a whole family, that he had found in the cellar."

Friedrich was accused, in Germany and abroad, of using language that implicitly equated Allied bombing with Nazi war crimes. But his conclusion about the lesson of the Second World War — "civilians do not show mercy to civilians. . . . Total war consumes the people totally, and their sense of humanity is the first thing to go" — challenges the Anglo-American memory of the war in ways that are impossible to ignore. In "Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan" (2006), the English philosopher A. C. Grayling extends that challenge, asking: "What should we, the descendants of the Allies who won the victory in the Second World War, reply to the moral challenge of the descendants of those whose cities were targeted by Allied bombers?"

Grayling is clear that he, like almost everyone in England and America (and in today's Germany, too), regards World War II as "a just war against morally criminal enemies." Still, he concludes that the practice of area bombing — in which the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command, in particular, indiscriminately bombed urban areas, in the hope of inflicting damage on Germany's economy and morale — was "a moral crime": "What is the moral difference between bombing women and children and shooting them with a pistol? . . . The anonymity of the act of killing from 20,000 feet?" In the end, Grayling is carried by the force of his own argument to an outrageous verdict: "There comes to seem very little difference in principle

between the R.A.F.'s Operation Gomorrah, or the U.S.A.A.F.'s atom bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York by terrorists. . . . All these terrorist attacks are atrocities.”

The Allies as Al Qaeda: is this the conclusion to which a re-evaluation of the Second World War must lead us? If so, it's no wonder that some historians are growing impatient with the whole project. The title of the English historian Michael Burleigh's *Moral Combat: Good and Evil in World War II* (Harper/HarperCollins, \$29.99), which was published last month, summarizes its response to the doubters: yes, this really was a moral combat. In his introduction, Burleigh is at least willing to grant that there were moral ambiguities involved, even saying that he does not “seek to excuse Allied war crimes.” Yet when he discusses Allied bombing, it is under the chapter heading “The King's Thunderbolts Are Righteous” — the motto of the R.A.F.'s 44th Bomber Squadron. And while Burleigh acknowledges that Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, was “obsessed with wrecking German cities,” he is far more angered by those who would second-guess Harris after the fact. With an eye on Grayling, perhaps, Burleigh fulminates, “Wars are not conducted according to the desiccated deliberations of a philosophy seminar full of purse-lipped old maids.”

This is crude and bad-tempered, but Burleigh's defensive impulse is understandable. If we lose our ability to take pride in the victory over Hitler, we will be deprived of one of our surest moral compass points. Yet the patriotism, sacrifice and bravery we read about in a book like “Band of Brothers” cannot be nullified by knowing more about the war in which they flourished. Indeed, the best of the new World War II histories can be seen as attempts to give us, in the year 2011, a more authentic and complete sense of what the war was actually like to those fighting it.

After all, the present is always lived in ambiguity. To those who fought World War II, it was plain enough that Allied bombs were killing huge numbers of German civilians, that Churchill was fighting to preserve imperialism as well as democracy, and that the bulk of the dying in Europe was being done by the Red Army at the service of Stalin. It is only in retrospect that we begin to simplify experience into myth — because we need stories to live by, because we want to honor our ancestors and our country instead of doubting them. In this way, a necessary but terrible war is simplified into a “good war,” and we start to feel shy or guilty at any reminder of the moral compromises and outright betrayals that are inseparable from every combat.

The best history writing reverses this process, restoring complexity to our sense of the past. Indeed, its most important lesson may be that the awareness of ambiguity must not lead to detachment and paralysis — or to pacifism and isolationism, as Nicholson Baker and Pat Buchanan would have it. On the contrary, the more we learn about the history of World War II, the stronger the case becomes that it was the irresolution and military weakness of the democracies that allowed Nazi Germany to provoke a world war, with all the ensuing horrors and moral compromises that these recent books expose. The fact that we can still be instructed by the war, that we are still proud of our forefathers' virtues and pained by their sufferings and sins, is the best proof that World War II is still living history — just as the Civil War is still alive, long after the last veteran was laid to rest.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 19, 2011

An essay on May 29 about books on World War II misstated the cause of the crash that led to the Japanese capture of the American airman Louis Zamperini, the subject of Laura Hillenbrand's “Unbroken.” His bomber crashed because of mechanical failure; it was not shot down.



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World War II is still universally recognized as the Good War. How is it possible to make such a description of such carnage on a grand scale? As John V. Denson explains in his essay "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the First Shot" in his book *A Century of War: Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt: Part of the mythology that surrounds this war is that it was the "last good war."* It was a "just" war because it was defensive. "Germany fought specifically in the second war to reverse the verdict of the first and to destroy the settlement that followed it," adds Taylor. "This is not peace," said French Marshal Ferdinand Foch after Versailles, "it is an armistice for twenty years."