

A Unique war experience? Reassessing the legacy of the “Good War” in US history and culture (1945 to present)

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World War Two, arguably among the largest and most impactful events in 20th century international history, has been the subject of a wide historiography generating a vast array of definitions and accounts about this conflict. It was truly a ‘world war’, involving in the fight as many as sixty-one countries and perhaps more importantly, it was a ‘total war’, which erased the distinction between the battlefield and the homefront, affecting civilians in unprecedented ways.

The many narratives developed since 1945 reflect the complexity of this event, with lively debates on many aspects, starting from its name: for Americans it is World War Two, but the British prefer the Second World War and the Russians favor the expression of the Great Patriotic War. Each participant nation strives to provide a distinct story line, couched within the boundaries of specific cultural attributes and traditions. Although never homogeneous, these narratives are delineated according to national considerations, if only because the very topic - warfare - necessarily brings forth geopolitical considerations related to national boundaries.

Tensions over the existence of a “shared memory” of the war are inevitable, and have arisen time and again within each participant nation - and among them. Nations subjected to forms of occupation by the Axis powers, as in the case of France, produced deeply troubled ‘divided memories’, thus reflecting internal political and cultural divisions over time. Yet despite the power of national frameworks, which still, to this day, delineate both the historiography and the politics of memory, writing about World War Two has remarkably developed into a deeply international and transnational endeavor.

This was true from the very first generations of scholars, who rose to the task. One illustrious case is the groundbreaking research of US historian Robert Paxton, whose interest in *Vichy France* (1971) matured in the context of the Vietnam War, as he grew increasingly critical about US military intervention in Southeast Asia. His status as an outsider to the deeply scarring experiences of defeat, occupation and collaboration which radically changed French political culture, was perhaps a necessary prerequisite to the writing about these dark years. Fifty years later, the study of Vichy France remains a fruitful area of research for US scholars. Considerations now relate to why Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s administration favored geopolitical stability over concerns about human rights in favoring Marshal Pétain’s collaborationist government. Priorities stressed the preservation of colonial empires over the protection of persecuted minorities worldwide (Neiberg 2021).

More generally, the very nature of military strategizing by the Allied forces tied together the fate of many countries and pulled their socioeconomic and political destinies into the orbit of the victorious nations. Given the outcome of the war, it is perhaps not surprising that US and British historians have expressed a long-lasting interest in the role played by their respective governments, as well as in the effects of their policies. Some have indeed contributed quite significantly to our understanding of the massive aerial campaigns launched over Western Europe, which marked the populations on the receiving end of the bombs for generations (A. C. Grayling 2007, Overy 2013, Knapp 2014).

The first comprehensive histories of World War Two emanated from the field of international relations and focused on political aspects of the conflict, with a marked interest in strategic military questions (Churchill 1948, Liddell Hart 1970, Calvocoressi and Wint 1972, Taylor 1961). In the 1980s and 1990s, more surveys of the conflict appeared, with a clearer effort made at covering more aspects, expanding discussions on military planning to include other themes such as the homefront. Socio-economic considerations, questions of civilian total mobilization and studies about broader cultural changes were also brought to the fore (Keegan 1989, Willmott 1989, Kitchen 1990, Parker 1990, Ellis 1990).

Today, military issues retain their relevance yet scholars are careful to bring in a multitude of local and regional studies into their master narratives, thus demonstrating the importance of introducing a variety of scales, from the macro- to the micro-historical, and back (Knapp & Baldoli 2012, Bourque 2019). Seen in this light, even the most conventional methodologies bear continued relevance when combined with the analytical tools of social history. Indeed, diplomatic history still yields significant insights, with regards to the crucial role of the Soviet Union in defeating the Axis (Beevor 1999, Overy 2012), for example. Well-known events are also revisited, as new research locates the Allies' priorities on a global scale.

It is perhaps not surprising that US scholarship has been slower to tackle the less palatable aspects of its nation's international role during the war. How can a triumphant nation coherently incorporate into its moral narrative about the "Good War" rather somber pages, such as the ones about its marked preference for the Vichy administration over the Resistance forces, or those on Allied bombing campaigns in Europe and Japan, or those about domestic racial and social inequalities? This is the challenge that specialists of the war face today: the production of stories which do not smooth over, dismiss or omit the numerous paradoxes that the "Best war ever" produced (Adams 2012).

The United States is a case in point here as both its leadership class and civilian population enjoyed a unique position within the international framework of this world

conflict due to the specificity of their respective wartime roles. Neither occupied nor subjected to territorial destruction, the US nation seemed to thrive while large portions of the world were sucked into mutual destruction. Then, as the war went on, the US came to share increasingly in the responsibility for the wreckage, in Axis territories - Italy, Germany, Japan, but also over friendly land (e. g. France and Belgium).

To be sure, there are objective reasons for the elaboration of the “Good War” narrative, due to territorial integrity, economic and technological improvement, diplomatic superiority, among other factors. The extensive wartime propaganda effort, with the creation of new government agencies such as the Office of War Information, and the *de facto* enrollment of Hollywood (Kopps and Black 1990, Doherty 1993), all contributed to bolstering the notion of a “good war” fought against heinous enemies. The onset of the Cold War played a crucial part in reinforcing the need for national accounts which promoted cultural exceptionalism in the United States and abroad. From the 1950s onwards, therefore, the US contributed to the dissemination of a manichean narrative about the war - and about its own role within it - heavily influenced by the way international power relations played out during the second half of the twentieth century.

Yet any decentering of the storyline, away from a solely American focus, contradicted such binary accounts, demonstrating that the straightforward opposition between the forces of progress and democracy, on the one hand, and those of totalitarianism and reaction, on the other, bore little to no relevance in light of the paradoxical experience of numerous nation-states, from the colonized powers of Vietnam or India to the occupied nations of Poland or Latvia. Rather than validating the tale of the “Good War” against the evil forces of fascism, these national accounts brought forth the combined primacy of paradox and ambivalence.

What accounts, then, for the durability of the US perception of World War Two as a highly moral war? Indeed, the end of the Cold War did not lead to the withering away of such a view. Other motivations arose out of a renewed international context of tensions: any future war in which the nation chose to participate was informed by the “Good War” archetype, from the Vietnam War, to the first Gulf war, and later the conflicts in Yugoslavia at the turn of the century. (Novick 1999). The Cold War also informed how key debates were conducted, such as the reasons for the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Hasegawa 2006, Young 2009).

In May 2016, then-president Barack Obama chose to officially commemorate the atomic destruction of Hiroshima for the first time since the events themselves. Intended as a pacifying diplomatic gesture, this political decision also reinforced the importance of current geopolitical affairs, in a context of renewed international atomic tensions.

This is where historiography meets collective memory, anchored in a nation's culture and refracted in the lens of presentist politics (Doss 2010). Cultural productions recurrently illustrate, question or reinforce the power of the "Good War" narrative. Popular culture, notably through books and film, weaves a thick fabric of material landmarks pointing in various ideological directions. The 50th anniversary of the end of the war provided an opportunity to revisit the myth: many academic (Ambrose 1992) and non-academic (Brokaw 1998) historical writings and movies (Spielberg 1998, Spielberg 2001, Eastwood 2006) insisted on celebrating the virtuous role played by the United States.

Such an approach also led to changes in the material traces of the war left in the urban landscape, as more monuments were erected across the nation (Doss 2010). Vocal opposition to these cultural landmarks emerged at times, especially in Washington, D.C. in 2000 when a group of residents and veterans publicly criticized the intention behind the project. By this point in time in fact, counter-narratives had also acquired new legitimacy, thus indicating that complexity and feelings of ambivalence about the war's aims and results were no longer rejected.

Those more prone to resist the "Good War" narrative had always been the soldiers themselves, either during or after the war. More aware than the rest of the US population about the limitations of official triumphalism, some turned to writing to make sense of the brutality of the war. Personal testimonies were published as memoirs (Zinn 1994), or collected oral histories (Terkel 1988); others were turned into unique works of fiction (Mailer 1948, Heller 1961, Vonnegut 1969) or non-fiction (Fussel 1989).

This cohort of former soldiers had never fit neatly under the narrow label of the "Greatest Generation." Thanks to the rise of the new social history, contemporary scholarship made inroads outside and beyond the realm of state-oriented interpretations, embracing a plurality of approaches 'from below'. Since the cultural turn taken within academia in the 1970s, literary works, cinema and art, as well as personal narratives such as memoirs, diaries and letters have entered the realm of accepted historical sources, even for scholars of the war. This, together with the development of oral history, opened the field to forgotten experiences of the war, such as those of racial and ethnic minorities (Wynn 2010, Robinson 2010), women (Summerfield 1998, Lilly 2008, Roberts 2013), Holocaust victims and displaced persons (Wyman 1984, Ouzan 1995 & 2008; Kaspi 2009, Collomp 2016, Hobson Faure 2022), also giving voice to those who had been silenced or ignored (Gara 1999), and continuing to deconstruct the notion of 'good war'.

Outside of academia, many had long expressed doubt – even an outright rejection - for the framework of the "Best War Ever". Journalists, political cartoonists, war photographers were among the many voices which, already in the 1940s, expressed ambivalence about the actions of their own government. John Hersey's groundbreaking reporting on the

atomic bombing of Hiroshima had an immediate, profound effect on a portion of the US public, whereas the equally important work of journalist George Weller on the atomic devastation at Nagasaki was censored for decades and only made available to a wide audience in the early 2000s (Hersey 1946, Gellhorn 2001, Weller 2006, Minear 2013).

Parallel to this trend, a more focused reflection on the study of collective memory emerged. Indeed, the history of American involvement in World War Two continues to be inextricably intertwined with national identity (Bodnar 2012). If history attempts to explain the past, memory moves the past into the present (Benda-Beckman 2010). To this extent, World War Two is endlessly revised in light of contemporary challenges, and the post-Nine Eleven world is only the latest occurrence of this. Heads of state choose to commemorate certain events over others, thereby tilting collective memory in certain directions.

Far from being a linear progression, then, this presentist lens keeps the past alive. Collective memory of the conflict, rooted in the country's culture, is constantly shifting. New approaches to the study of history, including the burgeoning of feminist thought and of critical theory, all led to new enquiries, unveiling a sort of collective amnesia or self-deception about the war's legacy (Samet 2021, Lowe 2020).

In the US, this now suggests a possible incorporation of these various approaches into a re-appraisal of the official narratives, thus moving in an explicitly critical direction. Our ambition in this special issue is to invite contributors to discuss the complexity of this conflict, by moving away from monolithic accounts of the conflict and bringing in new voices or lesser-known experiences, and drawing on original material from both academic and non-academic circles and cultural milieux.

The themes to be investigated include (but are not limited to) the following:

- The political and diplomatic history of the war
- The socio- economic and cultural history of the war
- Gender perspectives (masculinity; women's history; relations between the genders, sexuality)
- Race and ethnicity
- Age and generational considerations (children, youth, etc.)
- Personal narratives (including autobiographies and oral histories)
- The history of emotions in total war
- Intelligence studies
- Memory studies, museums, monuments and commemorations
- Film studies
- Photography and journalism

Articles should all be submitted in English. Proposal submission deadline: September 10, 2022. Articles to be completed by January 2023. A more specific schedule will be shared in the fall.