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What We've Learned About World War II

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What We've Learned about World War II

For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie--deliberate, contrived and dishonest--but the myth--persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

John F. Kennedy, Commencement Address, Yale University, June 11, 1962.¹

For more than six decades now historians have scurried into the archives and plowed through the documents produced during World War II. They have studied letters, images, and reports--many once censored. They have pulled new questions to the surface. They have made old questions, once so simple, more complex. They have pushed the "discomfort of thought" against the myths of this war. For Americans particularly historians have challenged the simple-minded notion that this was the "good war" fought by "the greatest generation ever." What we have learned about World War II has made it more interesting, more ambiguous, and more important because recent scholarship has questioned the "comfort of opinion" and the "clichés of our forebears."

We've always known that World War II was a total war. Total war demanded that all the resources of each nation focus on victory. This meant that around the world millions of men and large numbers of women went

into military uniform. It meant that civilians on the home fronts, willingly or not, turned away from their own family and private needs to the demands of war. It meant that governments assumed unprecedented power to direct the war effort, power that even in the democratic nations restricted cherished freedoms. The necessities of this total war demanded much of everyone.²

World War II was a brutal war, the most brutal in human history. Between fifty and sixty million people died, so many in such horrendous ways that historians will never know the exact number. While millions died fighting, the majority of the dead were civilians. The death and suffering increased as the war proceeded and moved toward a war without limits, fed by new weapons, new hatreds, new reasons for revenge against the enemy.³

Those who fought this war never forgot it, but people in each nation learned and remembered something different, depending on their own particular war and postwar experiences. Citizens have their distinctive memories, sometimes selective, always incomplete. Germans, British, French, Italians, Russians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Americans remember different wars. Each has taken selective and particular lessons from their unique experience of war.

Historians, of course, also study the war from their perspective as citizens of a specific nation. They are not immune from the blinders of nationalism and patriotism. But in recent years scholars have moved toward convergence and shared understanding on key issues.

A case in point is the question of the Eastern Front. From the American and British perspectives the Western

Front was often synonymous with the European war so that, for example, the invasion of Normandy was seen as the turning point of the war. From the Soviet Union's perspective, however, it was the Eastern Front, where Soviet forces inflicted more than 90 percent of the German army's total losses. At Stalingrad, historians now know, Soviet discipline, patriotism, military prowess, and good luck came to the fore. Lasting from late summer 1942 until February 1943, the battle was marked by vicious street fighting and the first clear-cut Soviet victory of the war, long before D-Day on June 6, 1944. Eventually the Red Army sent the Germans retreating, leaving behind about 100,000 dead and 110,000 prisoners. It was a major turning point of the war unacknowledged in the West for decades as the Cold War hardened a very different perspective. Over the last decade scholarship has brought forth the details and the significance of the fighting on the Eastern Front generally and Stalingrad particularly. Even in the West popular presentations of the war are now beginning to acknowledge the indispensable role the Soviet army and people played. Still, Americans struggle to comprehend the extraordinary passion and patriotism Russians feel even today on the anniversary of Stalingrad or of V-E Day.⁴

In addition to helping see other nations' sides of the war, historians have introduced new subject matter. One of the most interesting consequences of recent scholarship is an understanding of the ways that race twisted its tentacles into the war. Nazi racial doctrines were partly exposed at the war crime trials at Nuremberg, heightened as the Holocaust began to move toward wider understanding in the 1960s, and deepened in recent years

by museums, memorials, and films as well as traditional scholarship.⁵

Recent scholarship has shown how race played a role elsewhere too, as in the Pacific War. American propaganda was vicious in its racial stereotyping of Japanese soldiers as monkeys and rats. Even Dr. Seuss placed his cartoonist's pen in service of the racial side of the war against Japan. Conditions of fighting in the Pacific were bad enough, but racial hatreds helped push combat there to savage forms. On both sides killing of prisoners of war became common. Surrender became uncommon. From Guadalcanal to Okinawa the Pacific War escalated toward an American conviction that exterminating the enemy was the only course. That enemy expanded to include civilians too. American planes dropped incendiary bombs that destroyed the houses and many inhabitants of nearly all mainland cities (with the notable exception of Kyoto). Hiroshima and Nagasaki were in some ways just another step in the progression of violence against a people Americans deemed different from us.⁶

America struggled with race problems close at home, too, where Jim Crow segregation was a fact of life for African Americans in the north as well as the south. Despite professed commitments to unity and to the Four Freedoms white Americans did not surrender their racial prejudices even when fighting against the Nazis (an irony many at the time did not acknowledge). Discrimination and segregation on the home front remained the lot of black Americans through the war. Black factory workers were the last hired and only as last resort when the arsenal of democracy demanded more and more labor.

Black women stood further back in employment lines than black men. White workers walked off their jobs in protest when a black employee was upgraded to a position alongside them. Racial antagonisms in war factories, on public transportation, and at public beaches and swimming pools led to fights and bloodshed. Most tragic was the Detroit race riot of 1943, which left nine white and twenty-five black Americans dead.⁷

On the military front, African Americans were initially not permitted to join the Marine Corps or the Air Corps. In the Navy they served only in the mess. As war necessities escalated, authorities admitted African Americans to all branches, but through the war they served mostly in segregated units, often with white officers. And they usually did the dirty work and the service work of loading and unloading transport ships, driving trucks, and picking up bodies from the battlefields. Black leaders and ordinary citizens objected to the Jim Crow army and built some of the groundwork that in the 1950s would flower in the civil rights movement. But the fact remains that the United States fought against Nazi Germany with a segregated military force. Recent celebrations of the skilled pilots of the Tuskegee Airmen are based on real achievement, but such exceptions obscure the lot of the ordinary black service man and woman.⁸

Historians have learned too how race affected security issues at home. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans became convinced that fellow Americans of Japanese descent would join the Empire of the Rising Sun in spying, sabotage, and terrorism. Irresponsible politicians fueled the hysteria. In February, 1942, even

though military intelligence had no evidence of danger, the federal government ordered the round up of all Japanese Americans on the West Coast. Shipped to internment camps in isolated and desolate areas, these victims of war suffered greatly. Approximately two-thirds of the nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans interned were born in the United States and therefore were American citizens whose constitutional rights were severely violated. In recent decades, scholars have combed the archives and libraries. They have found not a single case of Japanese-American aid to the enemy.

The Japanese-American internment was for a long time little known. Even many of those interned tried to forget and not talk about these hard years at Manzanar, Gila River, or Tule Lake. Passage of time combined with the civil rights movement and other changes in the 1960s to push the internment into the light and to help spark a movement for redress. In 1976 President Gerald Ford issued a proclamation stating that the internment was wrong. In 1988 Congress enacted legislation that apologized and authorized financial reparations to those former internees still living. This particular story is among the most discomfiting in American history, but it now has wide telling in school textbooks and among the American public generally. Some Americans now cite it as evidence for more caution in protecting civil liberties in wartime.⁹

We have learned more about gender too. War is the most masculine of causes. Men fight, women nurture, or so the traditional story line has it. Because this was a total war, however, government leaders and citizens concluded that women might be asked to move from

kitchen and nursery to field and factory and even into military service. War propaganda encouraged women to do their part, though exactly what that meant varied considerably from nation to nation. As with blacks, American women seldom had a level playing field. They might operate a metal lathe or drill abandoned by the male operator who went off to war, but often at lower pay. They might put on an Army or Navy uniform, but usually did women's work--typing, filing, and assisting a male superior.¹⁰

Women in military uniform had a particularly difficult time. Most women volunteered for the best of reasons, to do their part. Scurrilous whispering campaigns accused military women of sexual misbehavior that led to out-of-wedlock pregnancies and venereal diseases. Recent scholarly research refutes such rumors. In fact, birth rates and venereal disease rates for unmarried American women in the military during the war were lower than their counterparts in civilian life. Male insecurity and traditional notions of women's proper place seem to have driven the rumor mills.¹¹

One of the obstacles to learning about the war at the time was government propaganda and secrecy. Victory demanded, governments concluded, that the full story and especially its tragedies should not reach civilians or even those in uniform. Everywhere the narrative was of a united people marching toward victory and a better way of life. There was little place for bad news or for confusing or ambiguous messages during this war. In each nation radio broadcasts, newspapers, film, rallies, and posters divided the world in two and made very clear which half was good and which was evil. The

Axis propaganda machines had no problem lying, even telling big lies. In the democracies propaganda was more troubling. The American government did not usually set out to deliberately lie to its people but attempted instead a propaganda strategy of truth. The news stories Americans saw, read, and heard were not necessarily false, but they were usually selective and shaded and seldom the full story.¹²

A case in point is death of soldiers. Americans knew that war meant death. In newsreels, magazines, and newspapers they saw images of dead Chinese, Japanese, Germans, and Russians. But for a long time Americans at home did not see a photograph or newsreel showing a dead American soldier or sailor. Washington censors concluded that such graphic images would hurt home front morale and aggressively censored them. By late 1943, however, when Americans seem overconfident of victory and less willing to sacrifice, censors allowed publication of carefully selected photographs of dead GIs. The bodies shown in Life magazine and elsewhere were peacefully at rest, however, without any signs of violence. Hollywood films reinforced such images of clean, heroic, and meaningful American deaths. Censored too were images and stories of the combat stress that made severe emotional casualties of tens of thousands of men.¹³

Other troubling costs of war seldom made the news reports at home. American GIs sometimes drank themselves to blind intoxication and indiscriminate violence. They lined up at brothels in London, Paris, Tokyo, and places in between and approached women in streets and villages as though they were prostitutes, which sometimes they were. Some raped civilian women.

Some murdered civilians as well as POWs. Because such actions contradicted the homefront image of a smiling GI Joe handing out chewing gum to children overseas they were seldom hinted at in newspapers nor in the stories men told during or after the war. The simple fact that the military purchased and distributed condoms in massive numbers has still not been incorporated into most war stories. Of course other nations committed brutalities: men of the Red Army raped far more women as they fought toward Berlin; the Japanese forced Korean and Chinese women into horrible sexual slavery. From random murder to the systemic killing of millions, the enemy did far, far worse. Moreover, wartime reports of GIs Joe's kindness to civilians were based on thousands of real events. Nonetheless, young American warriors far from home behaved in ways that raise troubling questions their grandchildren prefer not to contemplate.¹⁴

These examples in areas of race, gender, and brutality suggest something of what historians have learned about World War II in recent years. New scholarship has made the costs of war more apparent and enlarged those costs even beyond the horror of the millions of dead. What historians have learned raises the challenge of divergence between popular understanding of the war and scholarship.

World War II is unsurpassed in our time for its tendency to urge people to accept a binary historical framework, one in which there is good and bad, right and wrong, simple colors of black and white. This sort of history is comfort history. It makes people feel good. Everyone is susceptible, not only Holocaust deniers, but Japanese who deny the rape of Nanking, Russians who

forget the atrocities committed by the Red Army, French who ignore collaboration with the Nazis, British who unthinkingly defend the bombing of Dresden, and those in all nations who remember selectively in search of comfort.¹⁵

Akin to comfort stories are heroic stories. Many veterans have told their own stories in recent years adding to our knowledge of the war. Their memoirs and oral histories were spurred by the fiftieth year anniversaries in the early 1990s and by approaching mortality. Often, however, veterans have forgotten or deleted some of story, particularly those parts dealing with the brutality of this war. And while the aged veteran often claims modesty, later generations see, often rightly so, heroism in their exploits.¹⁶

Historical scholarship had moved in different directions from comforting stories or simple heroic stories. Historians can no longer present essential questions in simple black and white terms. That some in the war generation still can do so is troubling but understandable. That the second, third, even fourth generations born since 1945 still struggle to see the ambiguities of war is more troubling and testimony to the emotional force of this war and to the need for comfort history.

Not all we know about this war has changed. World War II remains for the Allied nations a necessary war. Most scholars agree too that it was a just war--if ever there was a just war, at least in Allied reasons for going to war if not always in the way they fought the war. It's hard to imagine the darkness that would have enveloped the world had the Axis nations won. These were fascist

nations that dismissed democracy and began a war the Allies had to win if the world was to have any hope of peace and of liberty and justice for all. It is certainly true that the Allies themselves were guilty of horrible brutalities, but there is no doubt about who was on the right side in this war. Today, not only in Britain, Russia, France, Canada, China, and the United States, but also in Germany, Italy, and Japan most people would agree that Allied victory was a necessity. Here scholarship and popular versions of the war converge. But a necessary war is not a good war.

Americans have a special challenge in understanding this war. Of the major combatants, the United States suffered the least and emerged as the nation with the strongest military and economic power. For America this became a war of triumph, a triumph that extended beyond 1945. Americans created an overarching narrative of triumph built on the “good war” myth and its companion myth, “the greatest generation ever.” America’s Hollywood films, public monuments, and commemorative events tend to celebrate this good war and the war generation with such simple labels. There are arguments to support such labels. But America’s good war notions had grown to mythical proportions by the time of the fiftieth anniversaries, marked most notably by the controversies that swirled around the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibit. Such national myths can comfort, but they can also lead to arrogance and provincialism.¹⁷

Only recently did Americans begin to understand the meaning of forcing Japanese American citizens into wartime internment camps. Only gradually did they

begin to question whether use of the atomic bomb against Hiroshima and Nagasaki or even conventional bombing of Dresden or Hamburg was necessary or just. Only recently have Americans begun to see that while their nation’s contribution to victory was huge and probably essential, others contributed as much or more. Many Americans during the long decades of the Cold War and after forgot that it was the Soviet Union that did the most serious fighting against Nazi Germany.

Each nation creates a different wartime history. Each tells different stories. In museums, memorials, films, and textbooks each tends to celebrate its heroic achievement and to overlook its shortcomings. It is the duty of scholars to challenge such celebratory and comforting history. We’ll continue to learn more about this war, from research, from the perspective of time, from the dialog between past and present, from the work, intelligence, and resources of scholars. World War II will never go away, nor will the scholars studying it. In some ways it may even remain the “good war” but never so simply as some have claimed.

NOTES

¹<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/003POF03Yale06111962.htm>.

² Among the most useful of the many general surveys of the war are: John Keegan, The Second World War (New York, 1989); Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War (Cambridge, 2000); Richard Overy, Why the Allies Won (New York, 1995); Gerhard L. Weinberg, A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II (New York, 1994). An indispensable general reference is I.C.B. Dear and M.R.D. Foot, eds., The Oxford Companion to World War II (Oxford, 1995).

³ Nothing since compares to World War II. To claim for post-1945 events a World War III or IV is a great injustice to history and to the generation that fought this war.

⁴ Richard Overy, Russia's War (New York, 1997); Alexander Werth, Russia at War, 1941-1945 (New York, 1964); Geoffrey Roberts, Victory at Stalingrad: The Battle that Changed History (London, 2002).

⁵ Good examples of this scholarship are Christopher R. Browning, Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final solution in Poland (New York, 1992); Jan T.

Gross, Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (Princeton, NJ, 2001).

⁶ John W. Dower, War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York, 1986); Peter Schrijvers, The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific During World War II (New York, 2002); Richard H. Miner, Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel (New York, 1999).

⁷ Ronald Takaki, Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II (Boston, 2000); Daniel Kryder, Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II (Cambridge, UK, 2000).

⁸ Ulysses Lee, The Employment of Negro Troops (Washington, 1966); Graham Smith, When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain (New York, 1987); Alice Kaplan, The Interpreter (New York, 2005).

⁹ Roger Daniels, Prisoners without Trial: Japanese American in World War II (New York, 2004). Among the many first-hand accounts is Yoshiko Uchida, Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family (Seattle, 1982). On the home front more generally, see Michael C. C. Adams, The Best War Ever: America and World War II (Baltimore, 1994); Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II (New York, 1994); David M. Kennedy, The

American People in World War II (New York, 1999); Allan M. Winkler, Home Front U.S.A.: America during World War II (Second Edition. Wheeling, IL, 2000).

¹⁰ Sherna Berger Gluck, Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, The War, and Social Change (New York, 1987); Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds. American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II (Wilmington, Del., 1997); Susan M. Hartmann, The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s (Boston, 1982); Emily Yellin, Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II (New York, 2004); Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds. Since You Went Away: World War II Letters From American Women on the Home Front (New York, 1991); Bruce C. Smith, The War Comes to Plum Street (Bloomington, IN, 2005).

¹¹ Leisa D. Meyer, Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II (New York, 1996); D'Ann Campbell, Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

¹² Allan M. Winkler, The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945 (New Haven, 1978); William L. Bird and Harry R. Rubenstein, Design for Victory: World War II Posters on the American Home Front (New York, 1998).

¹³ George H. Roeder, Jr., The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two (New Haven, 1993); Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies (Berkeley, 1987).

¹⁴ Gerald F. Linderman, The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II (New York, 1997); David Reynolds, Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945 (London, 1995); John Costello, Virtue under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes (Boston, 1985); Hilary Footitt, War and Liberation in France: Living with the Liberators (New York, 2004); Antony Beevor, The Fall of Berlin 1945 (New York, 2002); Yuki Tanaka, Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation (London, 2002).

¹⁵ Ian Buruma, Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan (New York, 1994); Fei Fei Li, Robert Sabella, and David Liu, eds., Nanking, 1937: Memory and Healing (London, 2002); Ian Ousby, Occupation: The Ordeal of France 1940-1944 (New York, 1997); Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States (London, 2000). Of course, there are people with very different and conflicting memories. See Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, eds. Japan at War: An Oral History (New York, 1992), and Studs Terkel, "The Good

War: An Oral History of World War Two (New York, 1984).

¹⁶ Veterans' memoirs that offer fuller accounts include E.B. Sledge, With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa (New York, 1981), and William Manchester, Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War (Boston, 1979). Exceptional in this regard is Paul Fussell, Wartime: Understanding Behavior in the Second World War (New York, 1989).

¹⁷ Michael J. Hogan, ed., Hiroshima in History and Memory (New York, 1996); Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past (New York, 1996).