

The Manley Arts

WILL MANLEY

World War II

If the purpose of war is to kill people and break things, World War II was the greatest war of all time. It leads all other wars in the key indicators of destruction: number of nations involved, military personnel killed and wounded, civilians killed and wounded, nations invaded, cities destroyed, bombs dropped,

and material damage inflicted. The only indicator in which it lags behind is duration. Since it only lasted from 1939 to 1945, it was significantly shorter than many other wars, including the Hundred Years' War and even the Vietnam War. If, however, you accept the rising theory that WWII is simply the central part of an ongoing global struggle that began with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and that continues today with the War on Terrorism, it does meet the length test.

In terms of the evolution of military science, World War II was the proving ground where guided missiles and weapons of mass destruction were invented and deployed. In geopolitical terms, the war's outcome was ironic because our bitter enemies (Japan and Germany) became our best friends, and one of our strongest allies (the Soviet Union) became our deadly foe. Finally, it is the war that dramatically redesigned the map of the Middle East and thereby sowed the germs of discord that have grown into the plague of terrorism. For all these reasons, no one can understand today's world without understanding WWII.

World War II is also a breathtaking story of Homeric dimension. It had everything the Trojan War had and more: great heroes, hated villains, thrilling battles, breathtaking twists and turns, awesome weapons, and the most heart-wrenching tragedy ever, the Holocaust. As regrettable as it is that Homer was not available to transform WWII into an epic poem, we have to feel fortunate that writers such as Mailer, Jones, Hemingway, Hersey, and Heller were around to cover the war. We're also quite fortunate that so many great historians (Ryan, Ambrose, Shirer, Toland, and Morison) devoted a good part of their working lives to researching and writing about the war. In almost every public library that I've ever visited, the WWII books outnumber the holdings of any other nonfiction subject heading. These books range in sophistication from highly technical treatises on atomic bombs to children's picture books that cover the entire war in 32 pages.

Next to baseball, WWII games were the favored playtime activity of my boyhood gang—no surprise, given that many of our fathers had stormed the beaches of Europe and fought in the jungles of the South Pacific. The woods down the street from our grade school served nicely as the Ardennes Forest, and the pond in back of the old ice plant was our Pearl Harbor.

My real absorption in WWII, however, started in high school when I read *The Longest Day*, by Cornelius Ryan. That's when I morphed from a backyard battalion leader to an armchair general. Ryan's account of the Normandy invasion was an exciting

blend of military strategy and battlefield heroism. Thanks to Ryan, I abandoned my other literary interests—baseball biographies and books about the solar system—and decided to major in history when I went to college.

Over the past 40 years, I have probably read more than 400 books on the topic. Most of them have been absorbing and exciting. As more and more documents have become available, there has been more for historians to write about. New information spawns new theories, and new theories lead to new conclusions. The result is revisionism. What was once considered historical gospel becomes historical heresy, and what was once heresy is now orthodoxy. Pearl Harbor was not a dastardly sneak attack by the Japanese but, rather, an intentionally provoked response to the policies of FDR, who had prior knowledge about the Japanese plans. The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not an expedient tactic to save thousands of American soldiers' lives but, rather, a savage strategy that killed thousands of innocent civilians in order to send a message of intimidation to the Soviet Union.

Today, 60 years after the war ended, there is a battle being waged by WWII historians. The differing theories and divergent judgments produced by this war of words often leave the serious reader grasping for reality. That's why I'm grateful for a musty government document that I stumbled upon in an obscure used bookstore. It's entitled *The Biennial Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army (1943 to 1945) to the Secretary of Defense*. The author is General George Marshall. There is nothing like a government document to bring a reader back to reality. Every librarian knows that if you want facts without frills, government documents always deliver.

This particular document, however, is not your typical government publication. While I will admit that it is not a modern-day *Iliad*, Marshall's report does transcend the pedestrian prose of most products published by the Government Printing Office. Its clear stream of concise but compelling prose is a welcome contrast to the murky waters of today's historical revisionism. Marshall's simple, declarative sentences resonate with certitude. There are no moral ambiguities here. Marshall, who directed the war from his office in D.C., lays out the reasons for his strategic decisions and tells why they succeeded. He is not boastful, but he's not particularly modest, either. His literary style mirrors his military strategy—direct and uncompromising. Marshall was the rare general who did not see war as an opportunity for personal aggrandizement. As a result, he never received the notoriety of Montgomery, Patton, and Eisenhower. He saw war for what it was—a tragic contest of wills to be resolved quickly and decisively. Today Marshall is known more for his post-WWII aid program to war-torn Europe. It's unfair that he has never received credit for being the man most responsible for saving the world from Hitler.

If you were to read one book about the war, you couldn't do better than this 60-year-old government document.

Will Manley also discussed World War II in his Manley Arts column from April 1, 2003: "Who Makes History?"

In almost every public library that I've ever visited, the WWII books outnumber the holdings of any other nonfiction subject heading.

Copyright of Booklist is the property of American Library Association / Booklist Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.