

WILLIAMSON MURRAY and ALLAN R. MILLETT

A WAR TO BE WON

FIGHTING THE SECOND WORLD WAR



WILLIAMSON MURRAY

ALLAN R. MILLETT

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Maps by Malcolm Swanston

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of the men and women who served and sacrificed in World War II to enlarge the possibilities of freedom—
freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom
from fear—as the human race enters the twenty-first century.*

PREFACE

World War II was the deadliest conflict in modern history. It continued World War I's slaughter of soldiers but then added direct attacks against civilians on a scale not seen in Europe since the Thirty Years' War three centuries earlier. On the Eastern Front, its horrors surpassed the worst battles of the first global war. At times the death struggle between the forces massed by the German Wehrmacht and Red Army never seemed to stop. From the Battle of Kursk in July 1943 to the Crimea in early May 1944, military operations involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers continued day in and day out. Then, after a pause lasting barely a month and a half, Soviet forces attacked the German Army at the end of June 1944, and the ferocious fighting in the east continued without letup until the collapse of Hitler's regime. After 6 June 1944, a similar war began on the Western Front. The amphibious assault of the Anglo-American forces on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day initiated military operations in northern Europe that would not end until May 1945.

The ferocity of the war among the world's great—and small—nations mounted with the addition of racial ideology to the nationalism, lust for glory, greed, fear, and vindictiveness that have characterized war through the ages. Nazi Germany espoused an ideological world view (*Weltanschauung*) based on belief in a "biological" world revolution—a revolution that Adolf Hitler pursued with grim obsession from the early 1920s until his suicide in the Berlin *Führerbunker* in early May 1945. The Nazis' aim was to eliminate the Jews and other "subhuman" races, enslave the Poles, Russians, and other Slavs, and restore the Aryan race—meaning the Germans—to its rightful place as rulers of the world. By the end of the war, the Nazis had murdered or worked to death at least 12 million non-German civilians and prisoners.

In Asia, the Japanese did not adopt so coherent an ideology of racial superiority as the Nazis, but their xenophobic nationalism, combined with dreams of empire and deep bitterness at the dominance of much of Asia by

the Western colonial powers, also led to vast atrocities. With the invasion of China in summer 1937, the Japanese embarked on a war that involved murder, rape, and devastation to a degree not seen since the Mongol conquests in the early thirteenth century. The Japanese added a new dimension to the slaughter when they used bacteriological weapons and poison gas against the Chinese people as well as soldiers.*

Faced with this unprecedented aggression by the Axis powers, nations espousing other ideologies, particularly Soviet Communism and liberal capitalist democracy, responded with a fury of their own. By the time the war was over, civilian deaths inflicted by both sides outnumbered combat deaths by a margin of two to one. The West's ideological and moral imperative to punish the Germans for their many crimes culminated in the Combined Bomber Offensive waged by the Royal Air Force and the U.S. Army Air Forces. Four years of battering air attacks, followed by invasion on the ground, destroyed virtually every major city in Central Europe except Prague and Vienna. Dresden, Hamburg, Warsaw, Berlin, and Cologne, among others, lay in rubble. Race-tinged revenge may have shaped the United States' decision to firebomb Tokyo and to detonate atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan—killing hundreds of thousands of civilians and leaving those cities in ruins. Yet as distasteful as these bombing campaigns are today to most citizens of the liberal democracies under sixty years of age, the Combined Bomber Offensive in Europe and the bombing of Japan reflected not only a sense of moral conviction on the part of the West but a belief that such air attacks would end a war that daily grew more horrible for soldiers and civilians alike.

Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy could not, in the final analysis, be defeated except by fighting. The United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and their allies had to fight their opponents in air, ground, and naval contests across the globe. Moral righteousness alone does not win battles. Evil causes do not necessarily carry the seeds of their own destruction. Once engaged, even just wars have to be won—or lost—on the battlefield. Because of the Axis' operational and tactical skill, stiffened in battle by fierce nationalism and ideological commitment, as well as the controls of police states, winning the "Good War" proved a daunting task.

*Just when World War II began is a matter of interpretation. Western Europeans and Americans tend to ignore the Japanese incursion into China and to mark the war's beginning with the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. For Austrians, Czechs, and Slovaks, the war also commenced two years earlier, when the Third Reich used military force to swallow up sovereign nations in Central Europe that the Western European democracies had abandoned.

Waging World War II required more than the mobilization and equipment of huge military forces. It required the deployment of those forces over enormous distances—in the case of the United States, across two vast oceans. And it required the creation of military power in three dimensions: in the air over both land and sea; across great land masses; and on and beneath the sea. The Germans led the way toward combined arms warfare with their *Blitzkrieg* of air and ground forces in May 1940, an assault of weeks that enslaved Western Europe for four years. But the Allies adapted and developed their own forces for air-ground warfare that eventually proved superior. Equally impressive, Allied amphibious forces—a fusion of air, land, and sea units—made possible the landings in Africa, Italy, and France. The air-sea-undersea-amphibious naval campaign in the Pacific doomed Japan.

Logistical superiority was crucial to the Allies' victory, and America's role as the "Arsenal of Democracy" made a critical difference. Not only did the United States carry most of the burden of the naval campaign in the Pacific and an increasing load of the combat in Europe as the war progressed, but its Lend-Lease program was essential to the military operations of its allies and to the functioning of their wartime economies. In contrast, the Germans and the Japanese, undoubtedly misled by the successes their military forces initially achieved, did not mobilize their own economies until the tide had already turned against them in 1942–43. Their desperate efforts to match the Allies soon attracted the assaults on their economic systems launched by Allied air and sea forces.

While the Allies' economic strength weighed heavily in their eventual victory, reinforcing and accelerating the tempo of military operations in 1943–45, material superiority never by itself proved decisive. Intelligence about the capabilities and intentions of their opponents became increasingly important to the belligerents as the conflict deepened. In the contest of intelligence, the Allied powers won handily. A complete misestimate of the capabilities of the Royal Air Force cost the Luftwaffe what little chance it had of achieving its objectives in the Battle of Britain. Worse was to come. In planning the invasion of the Soviet Union, Germany misjudged the Soviet ability to absorb defeats. The result was a catastrophic stalemate in front of Moscow, despite a series of impressive earlier victories in Operation Barbarossa. This failure was followed by Hitler's decision to declare war on the United States—an unnecessary strategic error based on a complete misunderstanding of America's economic and military potential to wage war against two enemies. The Allies slowly achieved an intelligence advantage over their opponents as the war continued. With information

gained by breaking German and Japanese codes, Anglo-American commanders were able to shape battles to their advantage and to mount deception campaigns that misled their opponents. The Russians used secret agents and signals intelligence to the same result.

With all their advantages in combined arms, logistics, and intelligence, the Allies still confronted the grim task of destroying their enemies town by town, island by island, in terrible killing battles that exhausted victor and vanquished alike. In that struggle, the greatest advantage the Allies enjoyed over the Axis was the capacity to make strategic decisions that balanced ends against means. At first the Allies were no better at strategic decision-making than their opponents. Perhaps the shock of their initial defeats provided the sobering learning the Allies needed to guide their strategy as the war continued. The Germans, by contrast, never questioned their confidence in their planning superiority—a bit of hubris that proved fatal.

In this book, we have concentrated on the conduct of operations by the military organizations that waged the war. We have not ignored the strategic and political decisions that drove the war, but what interests us most are issues of military effectiveness. We have attempted to explain the battlefield performance of armies, navies, and air forces; the decisions made by generals and admirals in the face of extraordinary difficulties; the underlying factors that shaped the outcomes of battles and campaigns; and the interrelationships among battles separated by hundreds or thousands of miles. Thus, we have written a history of World War II that examines the reciprocal influence of strategy and operations. We try to explain how military decisions were made, and how those decisions made a difference to the outcome of the fighting. We are aware that as historians, with access to documents and accounts from both sides, we can understand events as they unfolded in a way that the participants could not. In every case, we have attempted to judge the decisions of military leaders and statesmen on the basis of what they could reasonably have known at the time that they had to act.

We also believe that individuals at every level of leadership made a difference. From Lieutenant Richard Winters, whose squad-sized force captured a German battery and its protecting company behind Utah Beach, to the German panzer commanders like Erwin Rommel and Hans von Luck who destroyed the French Army in little over three weeks, to Dwight Eisenhower who kept a strong-willed group of senior commanders focused on defeating the Wehrmacht, individuals guided the course of events. We have attempted to identify and discuss those who made the decisions that

turned the tide of the war. Although we have not written an everyman's history of the conflict, we have not overlooked the hundreds of thousands of men in arms who bore the terrible burden of carrying out those decisions.

To the best of our ability, we have incorporated the expert research that has become available over the last thirty years into a full analysis of the war. The revelations of Ultra intelligence in the early 1970s and its operational implications have only recently achieved a balanced place alongside other factors that contributed to the Allied victory. The partial opening of the Soviet archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union has altered the West's understanding of the war on the Eastern Front—a historical event too long told from the German perspective. As students and teachers of military history for much of the postwar period and as veterans who profited from our own modest military experiences, we believe that we have written a history of World War II that does justice to that war's complexity and meaning. This, then, is our account.

Williamson Murray
Allan R. Millett

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1

ORIGINS OF A CATASTROPHE

High in the Bavarian Alps in August 1939, a group of Germans looked toward the heavens and beheld a spectacular display of the aurora borealis that covered the entire northern sky in shimmering blood-red light. One of the spectators noted in his memoirs that “the last act of *Götterdämmerung* could not have been more effectively staged.” Another spectator, a pensive Adolf Hitler, commented to an adjutant: “Looks like a great deal of blood. This time we won’t bring it off without violence.”¹ Hitler, the author and perpetrator of the coming catastrophe, knew full well of what he spoke, for he was about to unleash another terrible conflict, first on Europe and eventually on the world. How had Europe again come to the brink of hostilities barely a quarter century after the start of World War I—a clash of nations that had tumbled empires and destroyed a generation? It was indeed a sad tale of fumbled hopes and dark dreams.

The war that Hitler was soon to begin brought a new dimension to the cold, dark world of power and states, for it combined the technologies of the twentieth century with the ferocious ideological commitment of the French Revolution. The wreckage of 1918 had certainly suggested the possibilities. But the democracies chose to forget the harsh lessons of that war in the comfortable belief that it all had been a terrible mistake; that a proper dose of reasonableness—the League of Nations along with pacifist sentiments—would keep the world safe for democracy. Instead, the peace of 1919 collapsed because the Allies, whose interest demanded that they defend it, did not, while the defeated powers had no intention of abiding the results. The United States, weary of European troubles, withdrew into isolationism, and Britain followed to the extent geography allowed. Only France, vulnerable in its continental position, attempted to maintain the peace.

From the first, the Germans dreamed of overturning the Treaty of Versailles, which had codified their humiliation. The Italians and then the Japanese, both disappointed by their share in the spoils, displayed little interest in supporting the post-World War I order, while the revolutionaries in Russia focused on winning their own civil war and then on establishing socialism in the new nation. The ingredients for the failure of peace were present from the moment the armistice was signed; the inconclusive end to World War I, with the German Army still on foreign territory, made another European war inevitable. The appointment of Hitler as chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and the ensuing Nazi revolution ensured war on a major scale, involving nothing less than a bid for German hegemony over the entire continent.

Adolf Hitler was crucial to the rise of National Socialism. Beyond his political shrewdness, he possessed beliefs that fit well with German perceptions and prejudices. Ideology was central to his message. Above all, he rejected the optimistic values of the nineteenth century, in favor of a world-view that rested on race and race alone. On one side were the Aryans, best typified by the Germans, who had created the great civilizations of the past; on the other side were the Jews, degenerate corrupters of the social order, who had poisoned societies throughout history. In Hitler's view, Marxism, socialism, and capitalism were all ills that flowed from the effort of Jews to destroy civilization from within. Hitler believed that he had uncovered in his race theories the fundamental principles on which human development and human history turned. He had no more evidence for his system than Marx and Engels and their successors, Lenin and Stalin, had for their illusions, but ideologies, like religions, do not rest on facts or reality; they rest on beliefs, hopes, and fears.

The "biological world evolution" to which the Nazis aspired married other nasty quirks to anti-Semitism. According to Hitler, a lack of "living space" (*Lebensraum*) thwarted Germany's potential; great nations require territory on which to grow. Consequently, Germany would have to either seize the economic and agricultural base required to expand or else wane into a third-rate power. Russia's open spaces beckoned; in Hitler's view, they were inhabited by worthless subhumans, whom the Germans could enslave. German conquest would begin with the elimination of the educated elites in Slavic lands. The remaining population would then be killed, expelled, or enslaved as Helots. On these conceptions rested everything that Hitler and his Germans, military and civilians, would do in the coming five and a half years of war. The success or failure of Hitler's program would depend on the ruthlessness with which the leadership acted and how effec-

tively Hitler fused his fierce ideology to a civilian administrative structure and military machine capable of executing his wishes. In both endeavors he was all too successful.

It has become popular among some historians to suggest that the “internal” contradictions of Nazism would eventually have resulted in the regime’s collapse. Such views are questionable. Admittedly, internal dynamics and economic strains pushed the Third Reich toward war, but saying that is only to underline that war and the destruction of other nations were part and parcel of Nazi ideology. Had Hitler won, his regime had already proved it could find and motivate the people required to keep the system working.

Most leaders and observers on the Left missed the demonic nature of the Nazi threat. Leon Trotsky contemptuously remarked that the Fascist movement was human dust, while Joseph Stalin argued that Fascism represented capitalism’s last stage. The Communists busily attacked the Social Democrats as “Social Fascists” in the early 1930s, thereby shattering the unity of the Left, especially in Germany. Stalin’s German stooges were as much the enemies of the Republic as the Nazis, just less skilled.

There were, of course, many who prepared the way for Nazism. A massive disinformation campaign by the Weimar Republic’s bureaucracy persuaded most Germans that the Reich had not been responsible for the last war and that in November 1918 the army had stood undefeated in the field until Jews and Communists stabbed it in the back. A national mood of self-pity and self-indulgence fueled the Nazi Party’s attractiveness.

Initial Moves

In strategic terms Germany had won the Great War. Its industrial base remained intact; it lost little territory of value; it now fronted on one major power (a debilitated France) rather than three (France, Austria-Hungary, and Russia). Its industrial strength, its geographic position, and the size of its population gave it the greatest economic potential in Europe, while the small states of Eastern Europe and the Balkans were all open to German political and economic domination.

However, these advantages remained opaque to a nation that felt humiliated by defeat in 1918. For the Nazis, Germany’s postwar economic situation offered a considerable stumbling block to regaining the Reich’s great position of power. The Versailles Treaty’s restrictions on arms manufacturing left even the Krupp industrial empire with little capacity for military production. In 1933 the aircraft industry, for example, possessed only

4,000 workers divided among a group of bankrupt manufacturers known more for their quarrels than for the quality of their products. The only raw material the Reich possessed in abundance was coal; oil, rubber, iron, nickel, copper, and aluminum were in short supply or nonexistent. Consequently, Germany had to import these materials, and in the 1930s imports required foreign exchange, which Germany did not have. As with all armament efforts, German production did not immediately rise to meet expectations.

Hitler did warn the German generals in February 1933 that France, if it possessed true leaders, would recognize the German threat and immediately mobilize its forces. If that did not happen, Germany would destroy the European system, not make minor changes to the Versailles Treaty. Hitler's intuition was right; France did not have leaders willing to make a stand. In the years of preparation for war, Hitler managed German diplomacy with consummate skill despite the Third Reich's military weaknesses. In 1933 Germany withdrew from the League of Nations and then in the following year signed a nonaggression pact with Poland, removing the Poles as a threat in the east. These diplomatic moves thoroughly confused Hitler's opponents. With few exceptions, Europeans hoped that the Führer was *reasonable* and that they could accommodate the new Nazi regime.

In Britain, most were deceived. Only Churchill warned: "I marvel at the complacency of Ministers in the face of the frightful experiences through which we have so newly passed. I look with wonder upon our thoughtless crowds disporting themselves in the summer sunshine,' and all the while, across the North Sea, 'a terrible process is astir. *Germany is arming.*'"² It was indeed a lonely fight that Churchill waged. Well might John Milton's words in *Paradise Lost* about the angel Abdiel have been applied to Churchill: "Among the faithless, faithful only hee; Among innumerable false, unmov'd / Unshak'n, uneduc'd, unterrifi'd."³

More in tune with the European mood was the *London Times's* response to Hitler's purge of the SA (Sturmabteilung), the Nazi Party's paramilitary arm, when firing squads executed several hundred Nazi storm troopers: "Herr Hitler, whatever one may think of his methods, is genuinely trying to transform revolutionary fervor into moderate and constructive efforts and to impose a higher standard on National Socialist officials."⁴

The political Left warned of the danger of Fascism, but regarded the threat as internal rather than external. In Britain, the Labour Party urged aid for the Spanish Republic, which was fighting for its life, but voted against every defense appropriation through 1939. In France, the Popular Front government of Léon Blum denounced Charles de Gaulle's proposals

for an armored force as a gambit to create an army of aggression. If Germany attacked, Blum argued, no armored force was required; the working class would rise as one man to defend the Republic. His government undermined France's defense industry with social legislation and kept the lid on defense spending so that even Italy outspent France in the 1935–1938 period.

Soviet foreign policy was equally irrelevant; Stalin encouraged formation of “popular-front” movements against Fascism, but his policy aimed more at encouraging a war among the capitalists than at stopping Hitler. A savage purge in 1937 which decimated the Soviet military was further evidence of Stalin's belief that war with Nazi Germany was unlikely.

In 1935 Benito Mussolini invaded Abyssinia and added that country to Italy's colonial domain. Using the Italian war in Africa as cover, Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936, thus flouting one of the most important provisions of the Versailles Treaty. A political crisis in France that led to the fall of the government rendered French protests against the Germans meaningless. And all the British could manage to mobilize was vague talk about the Germans moving into their own backyard.

In July 1936 the civil war broke out in Spain, and that conflict furthered Hitler's interests by distracting Europeans from the German threat. While Hitler provided some help to Francisco Franco, the rebellion's leader, German aid remained limited. In December 1936 Hitler flatly refused Spanish requests for three divisions and remarked that it was in the Reich's interest that Europe's attention remain focused on Spain. The Spanish Civil War dragged on, living up to Hitler's expectations. Franco deliberately drew out the conflict to kill the maximum number of his loyalist opponents.

In addition to the suffering inflicted on the Spanish people, the war exercised a baneful influence on Germany's potential opponents, particularly France, which was almost torn apart by the war's political fallout. The British government moralized, but did little to prevent the rush of arms and men to both sides. Stalin provided military equipment but remained more interested in exporting the NKVD (Soviet Secret Police) and Soviet paranoia than in defeating Fascism. Aside from Spain, Italy lost the most, however. By providing “volunteers” and arms to Franco, Mussolini retarded the modernization of his own military. All that Italy got in return was promises which, in the harsh world of the 1940s, Franco failed to keep.

After his Rhineland success, Hitler's planning proceeded for two years without a major crisis. The performance of German Army units in autumn 1937 maneuvers, however, indicated that the day of reckoning was not far off. Observers such as Mussolini and Britain's General Edmund Iron-