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Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars against Germany: Myth, Memory, and the Distortions of Hindsight*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. viii, 191. ISBN 978-1-107-00471-9.

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In *Britain's Two World Wars against Germany*, military historian Brian Bond (King's College London) endeavors to dispel (mainly British) public misunderstanding of both world wars, particularly the notion that World War I was the "bad war" and World War II the "good war." He exposes this misconception principally at the popular level, but sometimes in the work of specialists as well. Over a century later, World War I has been defined in popular culture by the catchphrase "lions led by donkeys," the 1969 cinematic musical *Oh! What A Lovely War!* and the BBC sitcom *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1983-89).

Bond has little patience for the common notion that the 1914-18 war was an unmitigated, badly managed catastrophe for the British. His book belongs to the growing wave of revisionist historiography that aims to clarify our view of World War I by stressing its complexities over any black-and-white characterizations. He is also determined to quash the simplistic Bad War/Good War contrast with World War II. To that end, he astutely draws on two disparate lines of scholarly inquiry. He demonstrates that a comparative approach to what were, after all, two inextricably linked wars can improve our understanding of many aspects of each. He shows, for example, that we may better appreciate the motives and thinking of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, the most famous British commander of the Second World War, against the background of his experience of World War I, especially during the Hundred Days of 1918. The book bristles with historical insights of this sort.

Bond argues (rather too briefly) that the British perception of World War I is limited by a fixation on the 1914-16 period. In those early years, the British were fighting an unexpected war with little to guide them. They were suffering casualty rates beyond any previous experience and their generals were not handling things particularly well. As Bond points out, the conventional popular narrative of the war skips most of 1917, though lingering on Passchendaele, and then stops with the German offensive of 1918, ignoring Arras, Cambrai (except as a lost opportunity), and the Allied Hundred Days offensive. This lacunose version of events now as close in time to Waterloo as to the present is likely to remain cemented in the popular imagination. It is late, and Bond has much to do.

The book comprises nine chapters, an appendix, a list of selected readings, and a sketchy index. Bond begins by outlining the myths of both wars, then turns to such subjects as British policy, strategy, and generalship, combat experiences, attrition rates, the transformation of war, lessons learned, and finally the postwar eras. He argues effectively that the British generals of World War I were not much like their caricatures, while those of World War II have escaped the intense scrutiny trained on their earlier brethren. Though he also contends that the learning process for both armies was similar, he speculates that the army of World War I learned better and faster than its successor in 1939-45, largely because, in the period May 1940-June 1944, that Second World War army was not in contact with the main body of the German Army (the North African campaign was on a much smaller scale). Comparing the fighting experiences of ordinary soldiers, Bond notes that the hellish trench warfare of World War I had an equally horrifying parallel in the ground combat of World War II, notably in Italy and Normandy. The poor bloody infantry never had it easy.

Besides rehearsing the actual events of the two wars, Bond explains how the myths and legends about them came into being. He shows in fine detail that the conception of the First World War as utterly futile

did not emerge till the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹ The Great War became the war of *Blackadder* only after another world war had intervened.

Bond does sometimes push favorite arguments beyond the historical evidence. For example, he maintains that in 1914 a British government that was “anything but warlike” owing to its cabinet ministers’ general lack of military service, allowed itself to be rushed into war by a “crass German military strategy that made gallant little Belgium a popular unifying cause as well as a clear diplomatic *casus belli*” (27). There is some truth in that, but the Liberal government had put Britain in a bad position by August 1914 through its substantial naval buildup and ground commitment of an Expeditionary Force. Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and his ministers, preoccupied with a brewing crisis in Ireland, may have been surprised by the situation in Europe, but they were not as averse to war as Bond makes out.

In discussing American aid to Britain in 1940–41, Bond argues that Lend Lease represented a “tough bargaining position” (171) that gave Prime Minister Winston Churchill little room to maneuver and that his success a year later in convincing the United States to invade first North Africa and then Italy was a case of a poor hand well played. Again, Bond makes a solid point, but he fails to appreciate that the American situation was as complex and delicate as that of the British. President Franklin Roosevelt was, in fact, (mostly) sympathetic to the British but had to cope with a strong current of isolationism among both the masses and the elites in the United States. Though he gained more flexibility after his reelection in November 1940, FDR still had to proceed cautiously in his public pronouncements. Moreover, Churchill’s situation was not as difficult as Bond would have us believe. Despite their fulminations, the Americans had a pretty good sense that they were not ready to invade western Europe in early 1942; consequently their concession to Churchill regarding North Africa was less surprising than Bond claims.

These criticisms are more matters of nuance and shading than outright error. Brian Bond does exactly what he aims to do—show convincingly that the public images of World War I and World War II are dominated by myths that reflect not actual events, people, and historical moments so much as the concerns and demands of later times. World War II, for instance, came to be seen as a crusade only after films, photographs, and war crimes trials revealed the atrocities committed in the death camps of the Third Reich. The Soviet Union disappeared from western accounts of World War II as the Cold War heated up. World War I stood in stark contrast: it must have been futile because it was followed so closely by another, this time “good” world war.

Britain’s Two World Wars against Germany is a succinct, persuasive study that will interest and instruct any serious student of either world war. It points to two paths forward: first, the continuing recovery of the neglected aspects and events of both wars;² and second, further analysis of the myths and legends surrounding the wars, not just to debunk them, but the better to grasp their genesis and purpose. The conventional storylines may be wrong, but they shed light on each society’s efforts to come to terms with its past.

1. See Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (2005; rpt. NY: Bloomsbury, 2006).

2. I myself would dearly like to see a modern analysis of the battle of Canal du Nord.