



*The Long Shadow of World War II: The Legacy of the War and Its Impact on Political and Military Thinking since 1945* ed. Matthias Strohn.

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Political narratives using the World War II analogy have figured in many countries since 1945. As Jonathan Boff observes in his contribution to *The Long Shadow of World War II*, “In the spring of 2020, as Britain first battled the COVID-19 pandemic, World War II metaphors flew thicker and faster than Luftwaffe bombers” (111). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has witnessed leaders on all sides invoking World War II to justify their policies. More generally, Western politicians since 1945 have often found it convenient to employ references to avoiding a repeat of Munich and to highlight the shared experiences of fighting a “good war” against Fascism.

This collection comprises essays by thirteen international scholars and a conclusion by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Andrew Sharpe. They concern political, military, and cultural legacies of World War II in Russia, Poland, Germany, China, the Baltic states, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, various African states, the Netherlands, Austria and Central Europe, Denmark, and Iran.

The book begins with a dedication to “the soldiers of all nations who fought honourably in World War II believing, rightly or wrongly, that they were fighting for good and just causes” (vii). This is a view completely out of touch with all that is now known about the war, and much that was known at the time. Even the Allies’ “good war” narrative, though still popular, has long since been discredited; nor, certainly, has the reputation of the Axis powers improved with age. There is also a detectable political agenda: Sharpe states that

despite the growth of the so-called woke generation, a trend for apology and regret and a hard-to-trace tendency to be ashamed of national history, the British people still possess that depth of national self-belief that served Victorian, Edwardian and World War II Britain so well. (241)

Similarly, Matthias Strohn, in a chapter on Germany, strays into criticism of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), citing “the strong socialist element that had been part of the National Socialist DNA, the clue is in the name” (46). The claim that the West German peace movement was “heavily” funded by the GDR (50-51) is more political point-scoring than objective analysis. The reference to the “persecution of a 100-year-old former guard in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp” (50, emphasis mine) comes across badly.

The Second World War remains an emotional topic in the combatant countries as well as for many of the authors of the book under review. Strohn, for instance, writes that “every day, I look at my grandfather’s picture that hangs on the wall in my study next to his Iron Cross” (1). The war remains a highly politicized topic that affects what is or is not said. For instance, Niels Bo Poulsen and Olivier Schmitt discuss the role of Danes and Frenchmen serving in the Waffen SS, while Jan Hofenaar’s account of the Dutch experience makes no reference to this.

Although the quality of most chapters is high, there is no stated rationale for the topics chosen. In other words, how does one assess the legacy of such a horrific war in political and

military thinking? Though some of the contributions concern the war's impact at the individual level, the overwhelming stress is on "national actions and reactions" (239).

Some contributors address the war's legacy from the perspective of the recent past, while others focus on the immediate postwar decades. Pavel Baev's essay on Russia examines the legacy of the war under Vladimir Putin, rather than in the Soviet era. Paul Latawski and James Corum's chapters on, respectively, Poland and the Baltic States, address the war's legacy in light of present-day fears of an aggressive Russia and a reluctance to rely on a purely European defense.

Boff's chapter assesses the effects of the war in shaping British strategic thought, particularly in light of the UK's military shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan. Others weave the war thread through the whole post-1945 period, as in Michael Neiberg's chapter on how the memory of World War II shaped and justified various US policies.

Lothar Höbelt's fine discussion of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia would have been yet more effective by limiting its focus to Austria, with separate chapters for the other countries. Poulsen's comprehensive paper on Denmark combines a historical overview of the Danish role in the war and its physical impact. He also looks at the war's subsequent influence on Danish strategic culture, armed forces, and military culture, as well as contemporary Danish politicians' allusions to it.

A key problem throughout is an inclination to stress World War II as a causal factor for postwar developments while ignoring other explanations. Schmitt, for instance, ascribes France's postwar efforts to maintain its colonies to a belief that the Empire was key to its survival—a legacy he directly links to the French experience during the war. Undiscussed are such other plausible explanations as economic interests and the association of empire with national great power status. In other cases, it is hard to distinguish direct links from indirect ones. Should events caused by the Cold War or decolonization always be tied to World War II?

Only three of the collection's essays treat countries outside the Transatlantic area. Ali Parchami's piece on Iran astutely links political and personal experiences of the war with later developments, showing how the war still "lingers in the minds of Iranian decision-makers" (233). Chapters on China and Africa both cover a great deal of ground. While one cannot grasp China's post-1945 relationship with Japan without accounting for their wartime experiences, it is harder to assign such relevance to its relations with India or South Korea. And, too, one wishes for more on China's relations with the United States.

Richard Reid's chapter on Africa would have gained from some consideration to the role of Africa in the "mental maps" of European and American political and military leaders during the war, the formal declarations of war by South Africa and Ethiopia, the impact of the Madagascar campaign, and the wartime experiences of African servicemen. That said, it still provides a highly effective overview covering the way the war facilitated de-colonization.

Despite my criticisms, *The Long Shadow of World War II* offers readers an original and provocative tour d'horizon of the effects of that conflict on the political and military thinking of many states around the world. The impact of that war still echoes through the decades.

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