HI 537  
World War II  
Causes, Course, Consequences

This seminar explores World War II from its discrete causes in Asia and Europe through its major military campaigns to its global consequences. It includes discussion of economic, geopolitical, and moral consequences of the greatest war ever fought. We ask whether major decisions by individual leaders determined the grand strategic outcomes of the war, or whether material factors offer a better explanation of who won and lost and how they won or lost. While the course explores statecraft, grand strategy and command, it also deals with battle as experienced by flesh and blood soldiers and to a lesser extent with ‘home front’ conditions such as resistance or collaboration with occupation. It is international in approach: it does not take an Anglo-American centric view of the war, as is common. It explores in-depth the motives of the Axis powers, the strange policies of Imperial Japan, and gives sue emphasis to the German-Soviet war as well as key events and actors in Italy, Africa, China & the Pacific. It delves into the ‘moral history’ of the war, from obliteration of law and combat rules to starvation and bombing by the Western Allies, to Japanese war crimes, German and Soviet atrocities and forced migrations, and the origins and nature of Nazi *Rassenkampf* (“race struggle”) as a central war aim.

**Required Readings**

- Sledge - *With the Old Breed*, 2007 (Random), ISBN 9780891419198
- Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War, 1941-1944* Note: This book is no longer in print. So I have copied it as a PDF to the course site. It is a first-hand account of the eastern front by a young German soldier; evocative and intense. Reese began it as a diary/set of notes at age 21, when he enlisted in the Wehrmacht in late 1941. He was killed in 1944.

**Administrative Information**

**Office hours**: Tues & Thu 6:30-8 p.m. or by appointment. Room B-13, 725 Commonwealth Ave. Phone: (617) 353-1165  e-mail: cnolan@bu.edu (email is better)

**Grading**: Attendance and participation in the seminar is required. Weighting is as follows:

- Participation: 40% Must be regular and active, with evidence that readings are done in advance. Be prepared to answer questions and even to lead the debate.
- Book review (5-8 pages) 20% Due: October 15th
- Major research paper (12-15 pages) 40% Due: December 3rd

Graduate students are graded to a higher standard and write a 25-page paper. All students must submit a 1 page “work-in-progress” report on their research idea no later than October 29th.
SCHEDULE

We approach World War II the way it unfolded: chronologically and geographically and as a series of breaking storms that hardly let participants catch their breath. I have reserved one or two later sessions for topical treatments based on developing interests of the class. Take this list below as a fairly tight, but not rigid, guide for advance readings & topics.

**Week 1: War in the West: Democracies Defeated, 1939-1940**

Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 1, 2, & 3
**Online article:** “British Surrenders in 1940”
Nolan *Allure of Battle*: “Annihilation of Nations” online PDF

**Week 2: The War Expands: Africa, Mediterranean, China and Pacific, 1939-1941**

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 1 through 10
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapter 4
Nolan *Allure of Battle*: “Annihilation of Nations” online PDF

**Week 3: Germany’s War: Barbarossa and barbarism, 1941**

Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapter 5
Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself*. Foreword and Preface

**Week 4: Japan’s War: China and the Pacific**

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 11 & 12
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 6 & 8
Sledge - *With the Old Breed*: Part I: *Pelileu*
**Online article:** “Race and War in the Pacific”

**Week 5: Russia’s War: Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, 1942-1943**

Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 9, 10 & 13
Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself* pp.3-65
Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part II: pp.67-200

**Week 6: War at Sea, in the Air, in Secondary Theaters: 1942-1944**

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 11 & 12
**Online article:** “Prisoners of War in World War II”

**Week 7: Occupation and Genocide: 1942-1944**

Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself* pp.77-165.
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 7 & 14
**Online article:** Browse the PDFs entitled “Nazi-ideology” 1-6

**Week 8: Turn of the Tide: January 1943-June 1944**
Week 9: Assault on Hitler’s “Fortress Europe,” 1944

Beevor, *D-Day* read the whole book
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapter 15

Week 10: The Beast’s Lair: Germany, 1945

Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapters 16 & 17
Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part V: pp.322-343

Week 11: Defeating Japan, 1944-1945

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapter 19
Roberts, *Storm of War*: Chapter 18
Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed*: Part II: *Okinawa*

Week 12: Why did the Axis lose/Allies Win?

Roberts, *Storm of War*: Conclusion
Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Epilogue

Week 13: What did it all mean?

What if the Axis had Won? General discussion of the meaning of World War II, not as precursor to the Cold War but as the culmination of a much longer and more profound trend toward total war in the military, political, social, and economic history of the modern world.