

HI 537

World War II

Causes, Course, Consequences

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What we call World War II began from discrete wars and causes in Asia and Europe that only combined in military terms into a larger war at the end of 1941. Inside WWII were parallel imperial wars, dozens of local wars, coups and revolutions, and multiple genocides. The course discusses economic, geopolitical, and moral causes & consequences of the greatest war fought. It asks whether individual leaders determined its grand strategic outcomes, or whether material factors offer a better explanation of who won and lost and how. It explores grand strategy and generalship, but also looks at combat as experienced by flesh and blood soldiers and at 'home front' attitudes and conditions, from resistance to collaboration. It is international in approach, abjuring the usual Anglo-American view of the war. It explores motives of the Axis powers, the strange culture and policies of Imperial Japan, and gives emphasis to the German-Soviet war on the Eastern Front as the central and decisive combat zone. It looks in-depth at the war in China & the Pacific. It delves into 'moral history' as well, from global obliteration of law and combat rules to mass starvation and terror bombing as official policy by all sides, to war crimes, routine atrocities, genocide and forced migrations, and looks for the origins of the Nazi idea of *Rassenkampf* ("race struggle") as a unique, central war aim.

Required Readings

- Beevor - *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy*, 2010 (Penguin) ISBN 978-0143118183. Misnamed: it is actually a history of the decisive campaign in the West, to the end of 1944.
- Sledge - *With the Old Breed*, 2007 (Random), ISBN 9780891419198 Primary source/memoir
- Grossman - *A Writer at War*, 2007 (Random), ISBN 9780307275332 Primary source/memoir
- Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945* (2013)
- Nolan, *Allure of Battle*: **do not purchase** (only four chapters used). You can find the WWII chapters in PDF format on the course site. If you buy it, I get a cheeseburger in royalties (10%).
- 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 German soldier; evocative and intense but also self-indulgent and dishonest. Reese began it at age 21 as a diary/set of notes for a later literary work he never wrote. He was conscripted into the *Ostheer* in 1942 and was killed in 1944. Watch for religious themes.
- Short, **required videos** available on the course site. Also be sure to use the Blackboard site's hundreds of maps, stills, audio files, music and video mp4s. The music files include uploads from every major participant, including all the Axis nations. Many of the maps are animated.

Administrative Information

Office hours: Tues. and Thur. 6:15 - 7:15 p.m. on **Zoom**, after my HI 284 lecture ends (join the meeting at any time). Other times available by appointment. Just email a request directly to: cnolan@bu.edu Email is the best form of contact and can be used for questions if you don't want to go on Zoom with other folks.

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

- Participation: 25% Must be regular and active, with evidence that readings are done in advance. Be prepared to answer questions and even lead discussion, notably in break-out groups.
- Book review (5-6 pages) 25% Due: **October 29th**
- Major project: 50% Due: **December 3rd**
- See **three** alternative paper types in the assignment guide, a **fourth** video or online option, and a **fifth** group option (website and WordPress site details to follow).

Graduate students are graded to a significantly higher standard and write a 25-page paper that must be based on extensive primary sources (these can be online archives, from university collections to the Holocaust and Imperial War Museums). All students must submit a one page **paper proposal** on their **research idea** no later than **September 24th**. What's the topic? Why is it worth taking a chunk of your youth to study? What sources can you access (narrative, primary online, memoirs, other)? What is the **thesis question** you intend to ask and try to answer? NOT the thesis. Start with a research *question*.

SCHEDULE

We approach World War II the way it unfolded: chronologically & geographically & as a series of wildly 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. **Be prepared to discuss. You will be called upon**, by name. I suggest you write down **2-3 short questions before each class**, to which you can default if asked. Please **send these to me in point form by email** no later than Wednesday night, before we meet the next day.

Week 1 Causes of the War

Open-ended discussion on what you know, what you have been taught, and the the relation of WWII to its roots in WWI. Was it the second half of a new Thirty Years' War, or was WWII both discrete & unique? When and where did it start? Ethiopia in 1935? Spain in 1936? China in 1937? Or Poland in 1939? What were the main agents of change? Was Hitler essential to its outbreak? Or would there have been a second war in Europe without him and the Nazis? Think about this re. the end and aftermath of WWI.

[Online PDF article](#): Jeffrey Hughes, "The Origins of World War II in Europe: British Deterrence Failure and German Expansionism" (1988)

[Online PDF article](#): Teddy J. Uldricks, "War, Politics and Memory: Russian Historians Reevaluate the Origins of World War II" (2009)

Online videos:

War in the West:

Italy's War (all related to origins);

Germany in 1930s

America's War ("Road to War, 1918-1941);

War in China and Japan: Road to War in Asia (up to invasion of northern China)

Online audio:

Axis: Prewar

Stalin on Germany, 1936

Other Allied: Poles & Czechs

Churchill & Chamberlain, 1938-1939

Week 2: War in the West: Democracies Defeated, 1939-1940

[Online PDF articles:](#)

"British Surrenders in 1940"

"Churchill Lures US into WWII."

"Churchill death oratory, Neville Chamberlain."

George Orwell, Review of *Mein Kampf* (March 1940)

Nolan *Allure of Battle*: Chapter 13 "Annihilation of Nations"

Week 3: The War Expands: Africa, Mediterranean, China and Pacific, 1937-1941

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 1 through 10

[Online PDF](#): Nolan, *Allure of Battle*: Chapter 15 “Annihilation at Sea”

Week 4: German-Soviet War: Barbarossa, 1941

Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself*. Foreword and Preface

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Introduction and Part I: pp.3-65

[Online article](#): Stalin, “Stalin Speech, July 3, 1941”

[Online PDF](#): Nolan *Allure of Battle*: Chapter 14 “Annihilation of Mercy” Read to the end of the *Barbarossa* campaign, not to the end of the war (p.475)

Week 5: Japan’s War: China and the Pacific

Out of chronological order because prior to the week of December 5-11, 1941, the war in China was discrete from the war in Europe. How did Japan’s decision link these two wars? Notice how very late the Americans arrive, again. Think of this from the French and British point of view, or Canadian or Aussie.

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 11 & 12

Sledge - *With the Old Breed*: Part I: *Pelileu*

[Online article](#): “Memorandum on diplomatic exchange, July 23, 1941,” USA (Welles) & Japan (Namura)

Week 6: Russia’s War: Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, 1942-1943

Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself* pp.3-65

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part II: pp.67-200

Week7: War at Sea, in the Air, in Secondary Theaters: 1942-1944

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 13, 14, 15, 16

[Online article](#): “Prisoners of War in World War II”

[Online article](#): Nolan, *Allure of Battle*: Chapter 16 “Annihilation of Illusions” *Relevant pages on air war.*

Week 8: Occupation and Genocide: 1942-1944

Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself* pp.77-165.

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part III pp.203-225, Part IV pp.280-306.

[Online article](#): Browse the PDFs entitled “Nazi-ideology” 1-6

Week 9: Turn of the Tide: January 1943-July 1944

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapters 17 & 18

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part III: pp.225-244 and Part IV: pp.247-269

Beevor, *D-Day*, pp.1-262

[Online article](#): Ronald Reagan, “The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc,” Normandy, June 6, 1984.

Week 10: Assault on Hitler’s “Fortress Europe,” August 1944-January 1945

Beevor, *D-Day* pp.263-525

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part IV: pp.270-279, 309-321

Week 11: The Beast's Lair: Germany, 1945

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part V: pp.322-343

[Online article](#): Nolan *Allure of Battle*: "Annihilation of Mercy" (second half)

[Online article](#): Nuremburg trials: Report by Robert Jackson to Harry Truman, June 10, 1945

Week 12: Defeating Japan, 1944-1945

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Chapter 19

Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed*: Part II: *Okinawa*

[Online article](#): Nolan *Allure of Battle*: Chapter 16: "Annihilation of Illusions" To the defeat of Japan.

Week 13: Why did the Axis lose/Allies Win? And 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.

Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*: Epilogue

Grossman - *A Writer at War* Part V: pp.344-350

[Online article](#): "What a Load of Rubbish" (indulge me)