

Myths, Amnesia and Reality in Military Conflicts, 1935-1945

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By

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The Authors dedicate this work to the forgotten dead and those lost in the myths of war. They also would like to thank Cambridge Scholars for publishing controversial and serious history.

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FOREWORD

“It is humiliating to remain with our hands folded while others write history.”

—*Mussolini*

“A clear conscience is the sure sign of a bad memory.”

—*Mark Twain*

“Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.”

—*Marcel Proust*

“Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders.”

—*Friedrich Nietzsche*.

“Many return from war who cannot give an account of the battle.”

—*Italian proverb*

“Amnesia is a soldier’s best friend, and luckily, it could be taught. Missing limbs still ache, but missing memories never do.”

—*Alex London, Guardian Newspaper.*

“The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie...dishonest and deliberate...but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomforts of thought.”

—*John. F. Kennedy.*

“Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality.”

—*Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland.*

“Reality can be beaten with enough imagination.”

—*Mark Twain.*

“Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”

—*T. S. Eliot*, *Four Quartets*.

“Cherish those who seek the truth but beware of those who find it.”

—*Voltaire*.

“Man has no greater enemy than himself.”

—*Petrarch*

GENERAL PREFACE

"In our personal lives there are matters we choose to forget, other things we reconstruct into our own myths to avoid the realities. The same is true of national memory and therefore identity. Sometimes the truth is unpalatable."

The Second World War was the fulcrum pin of the Twentieth Century and dictated the rest of the century in Europe and globally, and to this day it continues to retain substantial ramifications. The subject has been studied intensively but there are some aspects which demand continuous scrutiny. The writing of history is not divine or immutable, and the interpretation of history depends on the viewpoint and bias of the individual historian. The history written by the victor invariably differs from the viewpoint of the defeated. There is not only the danger of a nationalistic approach, but also the complex web of political affiliation, both lending themselves to producing a particular assessment of past events.

The historian even at the highest professional level is always prone to his or her own historical and environmental influences. History books are generally read by historians and some general readers; they are rarely best-sellers. The public's opinion is more often than not influenced by films, television docudramas, and factual based novels. This aspect introduces what constitutes the "common opinion" or what this study refers to as the *vox populi*. If the person in the queue is asked an opinion on what actually happened in the past, the answer in the vast majority of cases will reflect a general and pervasive "feeling" of what has been handed down over the years; the *vox populi*. Much of this opinion rarely reflects the reality of what actually happened, it tends to generalise, and will often be based more on myth than fact, and much more will have elapsed or have been deliberately forgotten in the bin of national amnesia.

Sometimes the amnesia is official. The usual method was often referred to as a "D Notice" established in 1912 and revised in 1993 as the "DA," the Defence Advisory Notice. The alternative was a shut down in the archives which are reviewed periodically. To this day researchers wait to see what will emerge from recently released archival material.

Sometimes the matter was simply muted or hushed up. The self-inflicted exposure to poison gas by the Anglo-Americans, to be explored later, was kept quiet in case it either provoked an enemy response or outraged public opinion. It took decades for the details to come to light and is still little known. The mass carpet bombing of Germany created so many victims that the Luftwaffe raids were not raised at Nuremberg, and it took decades for Bomber Harris and the bravery of bomber command personnel to be publically recognised, and for the nature of “carpet bombing” to be studied in an objective fashion. The Polish contribution postwar was barely mentioned, Polish contingents were not part of the victory parade for fear of unsettling Stalin who was denying any involvement in the Katyn massacre. The British author travelled in Soviet Russia in 1979, some thirty-nine years after the event, and it was only in some historical circles that rumours were beginning to circulate that “maybe” Katyn was not a German crime. In September 2012 there occurred a brief news item that indicated that Roosevelt had ignored Katyn for fear of unsettling Stalin.

Postwar the issue of the Soviet threat emerged into the Cold War era, and it became politically necessary to keep West Germany on side; consequently some German military leaders previously condemned to prison were swiftly released. There then began the myth that on the Western front the Germans fought a clean war, and any abuse was created by the small number of SS troops. It is a myth that either side fought a clean war; a total war can never be clean. The politics of the day makes its own demands on the interpretation of the past and people and events from the past are often enhanced, debunked or forgotten as necessary. All countries perpetuate or construct myths from their past and forget some of the more disastrous events. My Italian co-author demonstrates this time efficiently from the Italian perspective.

De Gaulle built up the French mythology of “fighting France” and clearly the Vichy government was “best forgotten.” Sometimes the myths are necessary for a nation; it helped France restore a sense of dignity. In the same way postwar Germans treated Hitler as an aberration and some soon looked upon themselves as victims of Russian barbarity and the Allied bombing; it was a matter of survival in the postwar years. Myth and amnesia often have their roots in political demand. The Christian theological expression anamnesis refers to a memory which helps with current identity; Christians relate this theme of the Mass to the figure of Christ but it also worked in a similar fashion for postwar nations. It is the need to have a desired recollection from the past in order for an identity and to survive in the current situation.

Any event or figure in history will develop particular characteristics for a few years before it is challenged or debunked, then it settles down and an accepted version tends to ossify and becomes part of accepted history and a modern form of oral tradition. This particularly occurs when the event or person is controversial, famous or notorious, and frequently a degree of myth can be found surrounding the subject and much more forgotten in national amnesia; all depending on the subject.

Human memory is both personal and corporate. In our own personal lives we try and forget some aspects of our own individual past for the sake of avoiding painful memories, or alternatively we reconstruct the events in a way to fill the gap and produce a more palatable form of recollection. This phenomenon of our common humanity is just as prominent in the nature of national memory. Any nation will look back over its history and want to recall the better moments and enhance them, or will side-line some aspects or reconstruct them into a myth. Sometimes it is necessary to forget some memories by placing them into the bin of amnesia; that is to sweep the past under the proverbial carpet. De Gaulle with his postwar myths virtually ensured that the Vichy government was forgotten, and as a consequence it remained a part of the past which persisted to be unexamined until the American historian Paxton reopened the issue.¹

Sometimes the *vox populi* simply forgets everything. Many British youngsters today are completely unaware of the nature of the Second World War, gleaning information from films that there was a war, and that the Germans were the enemy and the British won. This is not just British laziness, “in 1976, 53% of French men and women did not know who had been chief of state from 1940 to 1944, and 61% did not know that the man in question had been the commander of French troops in 1916...50% had believed that Germany declared war on France.”² As time passes the vast majority of people rely on general impressions of the past, dependent on films, docudramas, novels and the memory of a war which has become more obscure in the minds of many people.

Some cynical historians occasionally claim that history is a form of novel writing and in recent years popular novelists have found that re-writing history has been financially rewarding, both in narrative and for television. At least this activity has made history more palatable for some people, and the Tudor period in particular has flourished. Perhaps, more cynically, history is closer to the genre of the novel than we would wish.

National history is often written from the political demands of the present; it could be a matter of we “best forget” that ever happened, or that was not “really a defeat and we won alone.” We live in an age of

celebrities who few know, but seventy to eighty years ago military commanders found themselves in the celebrity limelight, some ensured they stayed there, enhancing their celebrity status through memoirs and interviews by inflating their own myths, and often, even to this day their failings and flaws were overlooked.

Even the serious recording of history is made difficult by conflicting resources in the archives, some events viewed from a purely nationalistic viewpoint or from a political angle. One single event can have many interpretations and explanations, which is often due to the many possible shades of nationalism and political inclination, depending on the historian or the recorder's perspective. The vast majority of modern historians are alert to the dangers of interpreting past events in a certain light, especially when personal bias directs that light on certain facts to the detriment of other relevant information. Even so, it still feels for some historians to be inappropriate to dwell on the faults of one's own nation, the leaders of the time and their misjudgements.

Seeking the truth is not always the case with popular history in which the people of any nation are frequently pandered to by giving a sense of justification for past incidents. It is generally understood that Shakespeare, when needs must, danced to the tune of the Tudors. The well-known Whig interpretation of history and the Marxist slant *et al* is well documented. Nations need to cast some past events in a justifiable way by highlighting or underplaying them. This is currently demonstrated by the tensions between China and Japan relating to the war they fought in the 1930s and 1940s. Accusations of white-washing and militaristic Imperialism contained in school history text books fly back and forth. Most countries want to represent their past in a way that offers some sense of self-justification, even though the involved generations are long dead. If autobiographies or memoirs tend to be self-serving, it is also true that many popular national histories frequently fall into the same quagmire. Objectivity in history is difficult to establish and rarely achieved simply because the historian is human. Professional historians are often alert to this issue, but their works are rarely read by the wider public. There are those who study history, those who read it generally, those who rely on magazines, documentaries on television, and the ever popular reading of dramatic incidents, most especially those relating to war events during the Twentieth Century.

At an academic history conference there will be various levels of understanding or interpreting history, using their own in-house jargon. There will be another level of appreciation in that sector of a society which is widely read and which exhibits a variety of opinions. Nevertheless, a

vast majority, the so-called *vox populi* rely on popular reading, hearsay discussion, television, newspapers about the dramatic events of the 1940s; this period remains one of the most popular scenarios for Hollywood and the general film industry.

Generally speaking most Anglo-Saxon histories of the European war concentrate on the Anglo-American conflict with Germany, along with a few books on the Russian Eastern war. It is rare to find any serious research from the Italian point of view, and in this study the grotesque myth about the cowardly Italian is thoroughly investigated by a very open-minded Italian military historian who looks in detail at the Italian aspect of these momentous events rarely studied in Anglo-American history. Italy's role during this period is hardly studied in depth and this often provokes grave misunderstanding and misconceptions in *the vox populi*.

CHAPTER ONE

VOX POPULI

In 2004 a visit to a World War II museum display in Paris, in *Hôtel Des Invalides, Musée de L'Armée* a group of mixed, but mainly western foreign tourists were deeply irritated by the poor representation relating to the British contribution. The museum hardly mentioned the British apart from a case containing an RAF uniform, its owner having been rescued by the French Resistance and then “sent” home. There were pictures of American and French troops landing on D-Day 1, which was not the case, in fact there were only a few British trained Frenchmen present as commandoes, and the first French did not arrive in numbers for over a week and only began fighting in the *Falaise Pocket* part of the invasion. De Gaulle was only made aware of D-Day plans a few days before. Other photos showed Frenchman crossing the Rhine, and the overall impression was that Germany was defeated by the French with some help from the Americans.

In a 1983 poll on the question of the Liberation French people were asked of the many forces fighting Nazism which were the most potent? Some 40% thought the Americans, 6% the Soviets, 4% the British, 34% said French; as the French historian Rousso noted about the French figures, “this is an incredible response, nine times greater than those who mentioned the British, despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of British troops landed on the beaches of Normandy;” the greatest response coming from those who lived through the war, the over 50s.¹ This poll was taken over thirty years ago and the perceptions endure.

For the sake of French dignity and restoring its self-esteem de Gaulle built up from as early as 1940 the myth of “fighting France,” a France which liberated itself. He utilised the Resistance fighting in this effort, happy to build them up in the national story, but mainly ignoring them postwar because he was acutely aware that most of the Resistance members wanted a “new” France.

It is a very human trait to adjust the past and interpret history for the current moment; politicians do it all the time. Sometimes it is “done deliberately and explicitly, at other times inadvertently and at random.”²

The general public has a diffuse memory mainly dependent on groups with which they are associated, who in turn organise their memory strands according to their own sensibilities. The historiography relating to this period is also varied, not quite as diffuse as the public memory, but certainly reflecting the time in which the various historians worked. De Gaulle constructed and manipulated the history of events which he needed in order to restore his version of glorious France; the Communists exaggerated their role and importance and produced their own version in France, Italy and elsewhere. Of all the events during this period of French history the Resistance, even more so than Vichy (which was placed in the national amnesia bin), has had so many interpretations, so many conflicting memories and a variety of myths attached to its existence, it has become its own minefield.

One cynical British visitor on the aforementioned tour said the Resistance only blossomed when it was safe, and there was a great gap between proud words and deeds; that “however glorious the Cock may make his cock-a-doodle-do it was very different in the hencoop itself.” National bias or rather bigotry is a powerfully dangerous feature of human behaviour.

The British visitors walked out claiming “they had won the war and did so with quality leaders such as Mountbatten and Montgomery.” An American tourist pointed out that England did not win the war, but barely survived because they became an off-shore base for a few Colonial troops, and for American manpower and resources. The same tourist also claimed that Montgomery was a full-blown egotist who flourished on El Alamein which was really the success of his predecessors, and thereafter made “cock-up after cock-up” and this did not help international relationships in the post museum visit. The one Canadian present argued that he had lost family at Dieppe because Mountbatten, an egotist of immense proportion had authorised this tragic event for personal glory. This raised the temperature and the argument continued that evening, with some hostility, even though none of the tourists had fought in that war.

The Hollywood version of how America won the war was dropped into the conversational agenda with hoots of laughter over a film which purported to explain how the American Navy deliberately captured a German submarine in order to solve the Enigma problem. There were jokes about the cowardice of the Italians which although popularised during the war still, unbelievably, percolate through to this very day. There was not a single mention of the Russian contribution, apart from an American guest suggesting that America saved Europe from Bolshevism; perhaps unwittingly acknowledging that the Russian war effort was

dominant. German Nazi cruelty was discussed, but there was no mention of the Katyń Forest massacre, of brutality by all sides, and that in bombing Germany it was simply pay back for Coventry and London; statistics were never mentioned.

In the *vox populi*, the popular mind, there is a strong element of nationalism, albeit too often uninformed. In a sense it is the way human beings cope with the present. After the war young Germans, too young to have known the facts, were eventually made painfully aware of the dehumanised and brutal regime their parents may have served. In order to cope with this crushing guilt many developed a version of history which enabled them to move forward. They now became the victims of the aberration in their history of the daemonic monster Hitler; they were the victims of insufferable and unnecessary terror bombing, of Russian pillage and rape and the very few of their countrymen who committed such crimes were only the SS. Modern German historians such as Wette *et al* have had the courage to challenge much of this, pointing out amongst other things that the SS, small in numbers and as fanatical as they were, had become the national scapegoat.

The Wehrmacht denied any involvement in the Jewish problem for nearly fifty years until an exposé was produced in Germany by means of a photographic exhibition. There had been considerable debate about the role of the Wehrmacht in crimes against humanity. This photographic exhibition in the late 1990s entitled "*War of Extermination: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1944*" opened up a difficult yet productive debate on the role of ordinary Germans in the murder of innocent civilians," and the German historian Wette demolished any argument that the Wehrmacht always fought a clean war.³ In a French film TV documentary-film, *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* made by Ophuls, a German Wehrmacht Captain simply claimed "the Jews were not our problem."⁴ This war veteran acknowledged the Jews were a "problem" but side-stepped the issue as belonging elsewhere. Walter Ulbricht as early as 31st December 1945 had said "what unspeakable suffering has been brought upon our German homeland by Nazism."⁵ This idea developed rapidly, and "Germans now perceived themselves as victims of the Nazis," now stylized as a fanatical minority.⁵ After the German photographic exhibition shown in 1995 there

^A Ulbricht was a leading figure in the Weimar era as a communist leader, and later a prominent leader in East Germany. His views were not just those of East Germany, but were widely held throughout that country. Quoted text is: Ulbricht Walter, *Whither Germany, Speeches and Essays* (Dresden: Zeit im Bild, 1960) p.127.

were near riots. It could be argued that German historians of any integrity have the painful task of facing facts head on; perhaps a lesson for all historians.

When the British Prime Minister David Cameron announced that “we won the war” it was a questionable statement which reflected a very British posture, and he related it to the present situation as if to indicate that if we won in the past, we can do it again. The old adage that “we never learn from history” is made more cynical by the knowledge that we tend to choose what part of history, or what interpretation of history from which we wish to learn. The warning must be issued that current day political realities can be seriously abused by the misuse of history. The study of history is essential to the current day if the real truth of history is first and foremost acknowledged. This is especially true when politicians draw on the so-called lessons of history of their particular choice in relating to current situations.

Sometimes, as mentioned, the German historians are more acutely aware; the truth is not just embarrassing but painful. Each and every country has its myths even in the mid-20th century. The de Gaullist myths of “Fighting France” which liberated itself have exploded in some quarters to the myth they won the war. The British had their myths of tales of heroism, which are not always necessarily myth, but in 1945 Britain “just” survived and was virtually bankrupt, financially in debt to America until the next century, obliged to give the colonies back to their indigenous people, and somewhat alienated for a time from her nearest neighbour France. Britain turned to America in the so-called special relationship which in itself was and remains a myth; even when Eden had to defer to Americans pressure and dictate in the Suez Crisis the phrase “special relationship” was and is frequently re-introduced when political need requires. The Americans saw themselves as the “liberators,” and Hollywood saw them fighting alone to save the world, despising the Europeans, especially the French and British for imperial dreams, when America was itself constructing her own empire of influence on a global basis, and becoming wealthy because of the war.

Countries also construct myths about other countries, the Anglo-phobic French believing the British to be disdainful and “fighting to the last Frenchman,” the British often viewing the French as suffering from some form of decadence. The German was always seen as cruel, the Italian as cowardly, the Russian as a suffering automaton, and the list is endless depending on what country one is born into. This study is intended, hopefully, to try and stand back from nationalism, from patriotism, from

the fairy tales of the past, from Hollywood, from fictional history and ask what *actually* happened; the reality.

In order to do so a British and an Italian historian have joined together in some post-doctoral work, in order to raise questions of some matters in a popular period of history, namely the last World War. It is not a history of the war, but selected sections, just opening glimpses in which the first question asked relates to what the *vox populi* thinks, and then queries the reality. It may expose that some incidents of the past have been highly distorted, that images of some individuals have been blown out of proportion, or are completely different from popular thinking. Some events were so complex there is no single view which can possibly emerge as a one page answer or any one argument that can be totally persuasive.

Allied strategy and their usually highly regarded commanders will be examined in the light of the Italian campaign. The Allied leadership pitted against the professional German military officer comes under scrutiny, and too often Allied inexperience and ineptness is brought to light. The myths built around some leaders in the Allied camp will be explored where self-publicising egotistical generals became *prima donnas* and remain so in the *vox populi*. This study will point to the fact that this was not just eccentric behaviour, but it had more serious implications which led to many unnecessary deaths across Europe, from Italy, to Dieppe, to Caen and Arnhem and many other places. The mythology built around some leaders will be explored as well as the myth of the “special relationship” of Britain and America which is so frequently exploited for political and economic reasons by both sides to this day.

The study also includes two detailed chapters about the Italian part in the conflict, frequently overlooked in major histories which tend to dwell on the German, Anglo-American and Russian input only. The Italian part in the war is rarely studied; why Italy failed and collapsed is examined, and the Italian author takes on board the accusation that the Italians were always running away. This is a myth which has become a joke which to this day remains common, and needs to be studied with a degree of meticulousness. Most general readers in the western sphere see the war as a battle between the British and the Germans with the late arrival of the Americans and Russians. Few realise that Italy was a country where the fighting was as bitter and often hand to hand as it was in Eastern Europe, and within this turmoil a savage and open civil war was bringing Italy to its knees. Italy fought on both sides and the way they conducted themselves against Yugoslavian partisans, and the how they fought when they became the partisans will be examined in detail. The serious flaws in Italian military leadership are exposed and the facts are clearly outlined

and substantiated from German and Italian archives. In a similar vein to the resistance in France the clear political motivations behind the Italian resistance and partisan action is underlined, especially in Italy where the political ramifications during the postwar period were deep.

The defeat of France in 1940 has been described as one of the great military catastrophes in world history, and as General Ironside remarked in his diary “the *greatest* military disaster in all history.”⁶ For the British it led to the iconic scenarios of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, but it created a German hegemony which catapulted Europe and the rest of the world into a six year war with a fatality list so immense it is impossible to arrive at conclusive figures.

The defeat of France was probably the greatest military disaster of all time, and the explanations for that defeat have been discussed in depth for some seventy plus years. This study will explore the various reasons and show that they all played a part, but two or three elements are the most critical, one being the unpalatable acknowledgment that the enemy, the Germans, probably had the best military organisation and training in the world at that time.

In accounting for the defeat of France myths come and go and amnesia remains ever evident in the Gaullist myth that France liberated herself and Vichy was an illegal aberration. The self-inflicted wounds of poisonous-gas in Italy were placed in the official bin of amnesia and still remain obscure to this day. The Italian side of the war is rarely discussed in popular history, and some of the heroes of the past appear very differently after mild scrutiny and the benefit of hindsight.

Above all this book tries to be honest about some of the people and events of this period of history, and move away from mere popular opinion and stand apart from nationalistic bias.

CHAPTER TWO

ITALIAN CAMPAIGN AND MILITARY COMMAND

Preface

Although there is no actual evidence about its origin, there was a rumour that Viscountess Astor MP supposedly referred to the British soldiers in Italy as the “D-Day dodgers.” This gave rise to an amusing and popular ballad amongst the troops, yet reflected the feeling of many on the frontline. Many believed that they had become forgotten as well as secondary to what was happening where the war counted, namely in post D-Day Normandy. The *vox populi* often view Italy as a great Allied success, fought in sunny climes and frequently described, as was its predecessor in North Africa as a clean war. Popular among the myths still dwells the reprehensible claim that the Italians were cowards, and the popular belief that Allied troops were led by outstanding commanders. Myths about Rommel and Kesselring were constructed at the time of the fighting to explain Allied errors and failure. Whether the decisions to fight through the spine of Italy was right, along with the several blunders of General Clark which cost the lives of thousands of men are now disappearing into national amnesia only re-emerging in the better history books. Myths, amnesia and reality are the three keys to understanding the Italian campaign.

The fact is that the Allied command was inept, and at best totally inexperienced. German commanders such as Rommel and Kesselring have often been described in various postwar memoirs, autobiographies and histories as great commanders. In reality these two German commanders were often at loggerheads with one another, but they were highly professional officers. They were often elevated (if not deified in Rommel’s case) by the Allies in order to excuse the appalling Allied leadership, which was exemplified by poor planning, lack of foresight (especially regarding Italian terrain and weather), and egotistical behaviour which was so extensive that it endangered men’s lives. The Italian campaign, noted

for its high level of desertion, was fought through the spine of Italy with a brutality in places similar to the Eastern front.¹



Field Marshal Albert Kesselring
1885-1960



Field Marshal Erwin Rommel
1891-1944

The Italian campaign underlined a serious difference of opinion between British and American strategy, the nature of fighting a defensive war, the problem of partisans, and as to whether it was successful or not remains a question to this day. Above all the Italian campaign underlined the nature of a total war fought within the context of a complex and bitter quasi-civil war. It was not just the Allies against Germany; Italy had dissolved into a war where differing political ideologies and geographical loyalties led to vicious fighting and blood-letting. Caught up in this was the civilian population which was close to starvation and under assault from all sides. While the Germans conducted a vicious war with Partisans ranging from Communists to Catholics (who were also killing each other) and in which both sides slaughtered civilians; those civilians were also facing an Allied bombing campaign which between July 1943 and 1945 killed an estimated 64,000 Italian civilians.

A Clean War of Annihilation

After the war during Field-Marshal Kesselring's trial for war crimes in Italy, the German defence counsel argued that Kesselring and the German had fought a "clean war."² The argument was unquestionably based on a comparison with the barbarity of the German-Soviet conflict. There also developed the anticipated hope of keeping the Germans on side as the embryonic Cold War had started to take shape. At the conclusion of the trial Kesselring was condemned to be shot, it was commuted to life

sentence and he was released not long after like so many other military leaders in the hope that Germany might be utilised in any conflict with the Soviets.

In reality the Italian campaign was in places as vicious as the Eastern War, involving hand to hand fighting, massacres, massive casualty rates and later involved civilians in a partisan war, which was itself a form of civil war, and created a modern total war of repulsive proportions.

The *vox populi* tends to regard the history of the Italian campaign in the context of the Second World War as a “good war,” or a clean war in which two armies faced one another in the traditional fashion. The construction of the memory of World War Two is now so focused on the evil of the Nazi regime and the belief that “we” defeated it, there is a tendency to forget that the Allies did not enter war with Germany in order to protect the Jews and oppose evil, but for matters of normal geopolitical strategy. The essence of this was to prevent Germany becoming the dominant power in Europe.

The Nazi regime was so morally reprehensible there is a propensity today to consider the war in a one-sided fashion, regarding World War Two as being fought from the Allied side in a heroic if not a romantic way; this creates an injustice to the soldiers who fought. The Second World War was not a good war or an honourable crusade, although good men and women fought. Thomas Zeiler put it succinctly when he wrote “while their objectives differed from the fascists, America or the USSR, in the end they were no different than other nations fighting in a vicious war in exceeding the bounds of morality at times.”³ The objective of all war is to kill, and during World War Two this aim was taken to extreme levels, with all combatant nations aiming to eliminate the enemy threat physically and ideologically. The period from 1937-1945 saw governments of all persuasions enact a succession of military policies that resulted in the deaths of an estimated fifty plus million people, the destruction of entire cities, whole armies, and nearly all of some ethnic groups. This mode of warfare was relatively new, and needs to be understood carefully.

This interpretation builds on the idea of Geoffrey Megargee about the Eastern front as a war of annihilation, which focused on criminal behaviour taking place alongside conventional military action.⁴ Others have explored the “strategy of annihilation,” which used annihilation in a strategic sense.⁵ Thomas Zeiler argued that we can apply the concept to “non-criminal” action taken against civilians and the “home front.” In this concept World War Two is (to date, because we have so far avoided nuclear war) the ultimate exposition of the idea of a war of annihilation.

When General Sherman was commenting on the tactics used in his devastating march through Georgia in 1864, he stated: “we are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as the organised armies.”⁶ Sherman was articulating a “strategy of annihilation” where the focus was to destroy the enemy’s will-power to resist by attacking and breaking the civilian population. Annihilation was in many ways an American policy born in the savagery of civil war. This strategy was adopted by *all* belligerent governments in World War Two. It was most obviously taken up by the Nazi regime in the east and against ethnic minorities everywhere. Likewise, the Japanese were savage in their war with China and throughout the Far East. The Soviets had taken lessons from their Civil War and applied them ruthlessly; indeed the 1944-5 advance into Germany with its policy of mass rape was a characteristic savage exposition of the concept. The Americans and the British incinerated the civilian populations of cities across Europe and Japan through their policies of firebombing and the use of two atomic bombs. Furthermore, the Western allies also insisted on the “unconditional surrender” of their Axis opponents, a decision that meant that there was no room for compromise. This clearly indicated that the war would only end when the Axis powers had been utterly defeated. The upshot of this was that it encouraged a war of annihilation where the allies used all the tools of war they possessed, and “wasted” the lands containing their enemies.

This was different from World War One, although that war was part of the continuum that led to the conduct of World War Two. World War One witnessed huge death rates, but it was a war of attrition in which the national armies fought each other and civilians were largely untouched. The roots of the war of annihilation were in embryo. The massed armies were composed of conscripts, using devastating high explosive weaponry, zeppelin raids on civilian targets, the submarine war against military and civilian shipping, and the Allied blockade of Germany with its aim of starving the German population into surrender. World War Two witnessed this trajectory reach its apogee with the complete mobilisation of government and society, and the end of any distinction between combatants and civilians.

Twenty-eight nations fought in World War One and sixty-one fought in World War Two. The warzones and home fronts were indistinguishable in terms of targeting with the exception of the USA. In World War One only 5% of deaths were civilians, whereas civilians constituted 66%+/- of the dead in World War Two. In many countries more civilians died than those in the military. The majority of these casualties were not in death

camps. These casualties resulted from the strategy of annihilation, indiscriminate bombing from the air, arbitrary shelling on the ground, and the savagery of the fighting between both sides.

The physical annihilation of the enemy required huge levels of material fed into the military machine. As Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery put it, governments had learnt from 1914-18 that, “80% of our problems were of a logistic nature.”⁷ The need to fuel the war with machines to annihilate both enemy combatants and civilians required nations to pour vast sums of money and resources into the combat zones. The consequential material demands shaped why and how conflict took place, as for example in the course of the German attacks into Eastern Europe, Japanese penetration of South East Asia, and in the Mediterranean with the access to the Middle Eastern oil fields.

Understanding this aspect of World War Two does not mean equating the various sides morally, that is not the case. Nonetheless, a study of what happened in Italy, and comprehending the strategy and tactics of the generals involved, the destruction of the world famous monastery, the crudeness of the Allied approach to the conduct of battle it becomes critical to understand the context. The well-known vicious battle for Monte Cassino for example, was just one battle in a vast war where the overall aim was the complete and utter destruction of the enemy through a form of warfare unrestricted by economic, diplomatic or moral constraints.

Italy's Involvement



Benito Mussolini 1883-1945

Italy declared war on the 10th June 1940. The problem for Italy as a nation was that Mussolini lacked judgment; he fatally under-estimated Greek resistance, and also took little notice of the USA, informing his own Foreign Office “that America has no military importance.”⁸ The fact is that

Mussolini was out of his depth. Furthermore, he lacked the ability to lead his country in the modern form of warfare. The Italian military had a paucity of weapons and even less modern weaponry, the officers were poorly trained and lacked professionalism which doomed Italy from the start. This will be outlined in detail by my co-author in later chapters.

“The revisionist historian De Felice claimed that *one man alone* had taken Italy into the war, although, in his opinion, Mussolini’s motivation was at least in part the creditable one of suspicion of Nazi Germany and a desire somehow to restrict its hegemony.”⁹ The historian Farrell in his work *Mussolini* also argued that the Italian dictator was taking the safest route for his country, whilst building up the defences at the Brenner Pass. Despite these claims Mussolini was bellicose, had imperial desires in North Africa, and was constantly resentful towards the British and their colonies.¹⁰

Mussolini came into the war not because of his desire to join in the racial and ideological wars of the Third Reich, but because he was jealous of German gains. In a timeworn way he wanted a share of the spoils, but the problem was from where he could accumulate such territory. Vichy France still controlled French possessions and Britain would defend its colonies. Mussolini’s aim was to bolster the Italians’ Ethiopian-Eritrean empire. To do so the Fascist government decided that it needed to absorb Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt as well as Algeria, Morocco, the Sudan, and the Horn territories, including Somaliland.

The war in the Italian theatre began with campaigns in the Mediterranean in East Africa, the Western Desert and also the Balkans. The initial Italian aim was to join the 250,000 Italian troops in Libya with 92,000 from Italy and defeat Britain’s 10,000 soldiers in Sudan, Somaliland and Kenya. The British General Wavell had 63,000 other troops in East Africa, Egypt, Iraq and Palestine to assist, but Italian plans did not see this as an issue because they were superior in troop numbers and material. The Italians had 500 aircraft in Africa and 1200 in Italy the British had 370 in the whole region.

The Italian army had expanded too rapidly and consequently had command as well as logistical weaknesses. The navy lacked leadership and the sound economic basis to sustain it at sea, and the Italian aircraft were old compared to British models. As noted, Mussolini was a poor leader; he ranted at his generals, and made them completely subordinate to him, but provided no new ideas or real leadership. The Fascist revolution was not deeply entrenched within the country, and his power-base was correspondingly shallow. The King Victor Emmanuel was autonomous, while Roman politicians were strong, and the Mafia thrived in the south.