Populist Hearsay of 1939-45

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The Myths, Blunders, Accidents and Prima Donnas

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4932-1
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4932-6

Dedicated to my Wife Carol and our Family

"Such has been the impact of the war upon our culture and our national consciousness that it has become hard to separate out the recycled myths from some of the occasionally grubby realities."

—O'Farrell, *An Utterly Impartial History of Britain* (London: Doubleday, 2007) p.430

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PREFACE

This short book is not about re-writing the history of the European aspect of the Second World War, nor does it seek to be comprehensive, but it explores selected areas where history has become blurred by legend, myth, and hearsay, mainly because of the demands of national interest. This happens in most countries where politicians and much of the populace prefer a modified and usually a rosier picture than historical evidence indicates. It will explore some personalities, some campaigns, some incidents and issues, to understand what happened in an objective way as possible. Were military leaders such as Mountbatten and Montgomery worthy of their popular reputation, were the Italian soldiers really cowards, why is there no official French history, was everything as worthwhile as it is often painted in the chatter of the *vox populi*, the main thread of popular rumour and gossip?

It may be that this exploration challenges views imbued by years of national bias and propaganda and cause a degree of anger, but it is better to raise a few question marks than live in a fool's paradise. It is from history we try to understand today and prepare for tomorrow, with George Bernard Shaw's warning that "we learn from history that we learn nothing from history."

INTRODUCTION

The Popular Picture of WW2 and the Realities

Objective war history is difficult to write, and World War II has produced many histories which differ according to when and by whom they were written. Many historians in the past and to this day tend to write national histories with a tendency to justify their home nation. In looking back to past events, a nation's perceptions differ, often clashing with the views of their neighbours. In the recent Brexit debate in the UK it was claimed many times that "we won the war" and "we do not need Europe;" politicians were as guilty of this as the *vox populi*. Britain survived rather than won the war single-handedly and managed because of Allies. Any UK youngster born in the baby boom postwar era will have grown up instilled with the belief that the British were the victors, not just one country among many. The Brexit campaign's "Britain won the war" was heard countless times, sometimes uttered by people who had no idea even what the war was about. During the 1950s the cinema would soon make it clear that the Americans were involved, and from their perspective, and to British

annoyance, they appeared to indicate they were the only ones fighting; this was not American, it was typically Hollywood, with its influence felt at the popular level. Even today, with a more objective approach in the cinema, the Spielberg/Ambrose direction still hold a rigid conservative approach which tends to ignore the Soviet contribution. In France, at the *L'Hôtel National des Invalides,* in a museum dedicated to World War II, on a visit in 1990 the British were hardly mentioned, and the photographs and notes tended to imply that Germany was defeated by the French with American assistance. All countries have their bias and special points of view regarding the mutual history of World War Two, and always somewhat nationally self-centred.

The Russian perspective differs sharply from the Western Allies, but their major contribution is mainly ignored by the Western world. Propaganda, bureaucratic, or built-in by popular demand, a bias ingrains itself into the public mind, most especially in matters of the moral high ground of conduct and purpose, as well as in the military leaders and their prowess at arms. Such is the subtlety of national propaganda it develops almost from the cradle.

There is such a phenomenon as the collective memory which maximises certain aspects to the detriment of others. The Western memory has been that Hitler was evil and started the war, and only Britain and France took the moral high ground by declaring war. Britain stood alone after June 1940, and part of the legend about the British stand in 1939 is that of a small island, ill-prepared standing against Goliath, but the historian, David Edgerton in his book *Britain's War Machine*, published in 2011, paints quite the opposite picture, causing a degree of shock since it appears to turn a mere legend into a myth.[1] Britain may have "stood at bay" according to J. B. Priestley, but not alone, the contribution from the Dominions and Empire is often overlooked. England survived long enough for the American partnership to develop into a winning situation, and with the power of the Soviets the Nazi regime was crushed. In some American schoolbooks the Second World War is given the dates of 1941-45. It has been said that "the Allied part of the war…has been sanitized and romanticized beyond recognition by the sentimental, the loony patriotic, the ignorant and the bloodthirsty."[2]

When some of the baby boom children started to read serious histories it revealed that Britain had not so much won the war, but had survived with the help of America, but the Western war in Europe was almost insignificant compared to what Russians call "The Great Patriotic War." The various shades of these arguments are still being hotly contested to this day, and they will be the focus of historical debate for years to come. Statistics have

varied, cannot always be trusted, but generally the UK lost some 450,900 people during the war, the USA 419,400, Germany between 6.9 to 7.4 million, and the USSR between a staggering 20 to 27 million. These figures indicate the mayhem because they lack certainty, but they clearly demonstrate that the main suffering and body blows were in the East of Europe. Another source of statistics listed the military deaths: the UK lost about 200,000; the USA around150,000; the USSR at least 868,000. In terms of civilians the UK figure is estimated in the region of 60,595 the USSR around 25 million, Poland 6 million and Germany 6 million. The figures from all sources differ, but they underline that the USSR lost by far the most, and next was Germany.

Stalin may have been right when he said the English gave time, the Americans gave money and the Soviets gave blood. The war was unquestionably won by the Soviets, and because of the Red Army's victories Stalin, frequently referred to as Uncle Joe in the West, was viewed in a positive light. Since Russia has become more open, and Stalin's behaviour has been explored, it is immediately apparent that Stalin and his system were little better than Hitler, possibly worse, mainly because Stalin lasted longer. The facts would reveal that Stalinism was, as far as it is possible to measure such things, as evil as Nazism; the only difference being that Nazism was cut mercifully short. It has been suggested the NKVD, the Soviet police probably shot more Red Army soldiers to encourage the others than the UK and USA lost in the war.

It meant of course that the main thrust of World War II was between two evil tyrants, and the West had to side with one of them, and propaganda came into immediate service. The West had to change the old view of Bolshevist Russia into a friendly neighbour fighting the same tyrant. It was all sorely tested over the Katyń massacre; in the war a British Foreign Officer, Sir Owen O'Malley produced a report which placed the probability of blame on the shoulders of Stalin, but this was unacceptable to Western propaganda, and British soldiers were threatened with court martial if they suggested otherwise.[*] Even the cartoonist David Low produced cartoons showing Poles as troublemakers; such is the power of political needs in propaganda and myth making.

The British did not suffer like most of Europe and remained geographically intact and unoccupied. The Americans were even more distanced from those nations which experienced invasion, massacre, starvation, bombing, population removal, genocide and ethnic cleansing.

[*] 25,000+/- Poles were massacred in Katyń Forest and some other areas in 1940; 50 years later in 1990 Gorbachev admitted the KKVD had done this.

The historian Norman Davies expressed this situation when he wrote that because of this America "was more susceptible to post-war myth-making than anyone else. Nonetheless, the gap between the British and Americans was much less than the gulf between the 'Anglo-Saxons' and the continental Europeans. The gulf of experience must be considered when postwar attitudes and postwar historiography are assessed."[3]

As time separates us from the twentieth century there will continue to be that tension between legend and what really happened, between reality and the myth of what national politics would like us to think, and popular hearsay. Propaganda may be the deliberate manipulation by government, or it may be driven by more subtle, but convincing demands caused by a developing situation, often at the *vox populi* level led by films. If we need the help of a neighbour, it is generally best to see him in a favourable light, but it is human nature to put ourselves into the best light.

The General Perceptions

In the *vox populi*, namely the voice of most people or the populist attitude, the view of the Second World War is often consistent, sometimes verges on the truth, often reflects hearsay, and with a gathering generality which too often blurs the reality.

The Western Allies, America, Britain and France have always portrayed themselves as holding the moral high ground, and because of the Holocaust and the barbarity of the Eastern War it is understandable, but it was never as black and white as popular myth tends to relate. This statement is not simply to do with the enormous amount of death brought about by carpet bombing, or involve massacres on the battlefield which simply cannot be excused in terms of the "heat of battle," or incidents such as the raping and pillaging by French Colonial troops raging through Italy.[*] Or for that matter the projected use of poisonous gas, but it covers much more. It also includes the postwar period, the vilification of Germany whilst hypocritically using its scientists and military experts to strengthen themselves, and then by bringing West Germany onside to form a barrier against the Stalinist variation of Communism.[†] The problem is ongoing.

The Germans have been charged with being totally barbaric, and because of the holocaust it remains for many a charge against an entire

[*] In Naples, after Salerno, French Colonial troops committed over 100 murders and over 3,000 rapes.

[†] Von Braun the missile scientist, the Gestapo Chief Klaus Barbie for his expertise, the German experts on anti-partisan warfare SS General von dem Bach-Zelewski and Field Marshal Kesselring to mention just four.

nation down through the ages, and while most Germans accept this many still think they were right concerning the dangers of Communism. There were times when some Germans tried to convey that they were the victims (with justification for some), regarding Hitler as an unwanted aberration or abnormality in their history, and others point to the carpet bombing and retribution for being led by a dictator under whom they had little or no choice.

The Russians, tainted with the image of Stalin, have often been regarded as cruel, sinister and totally manipulative, but Russians look back and view their history as the massive self-sacrifice which saved the world. The Americans have, through the service of Hollywood, viewed themselves as the selfless good guys, yet to everything they committed themselves there were financial ramifications, and even into the 21st Century the British, their closest allies, were still paying for resources used in the 1939-45 war. The British have regarded themselves as the "little guy" who held firm against the odds, and yet they were backed by massive colonies, and there was just about time for Britain's industrial strength to be coupled with that of America. The Italians blamed Mussolini and justify their history with their eventual partisan warfare, and the French blamed the British and rewrote their history. Each nation and its inhabitants have their own populist view.

Propaganda and Rewriting History

It was not just Göbbels who ran an effective propaganda ministry, but every country frequently tries to convince its general public of how to think not only at the time of events, but in looking back to its history. It is generally understood that once the dogs of war are unleashed and total war becomes the norm, human behaviour and the ethics of conduct are turned upside down and inside out. It is in the postwar analysis, in that period of justification, that the national Propaganda machines both knowingly and often unwittingly come into play, creating from the ghastly realities a variety of myths, legends, and encouraging hearsay to bolster the national self-image by denigrating others. Sometimes these legends grow from the incident itself by the demands of war-propaganda, but then they increase in strength and grow to mythological proportions. The British BEF expulsion at Dunkirk is a classic example of where a downright crushing defeat was given the appearance of victory in exhibiting British bravery, and the solidarity of the nation through small boats. It was undoubtedly a remarkable retreat; it was unquestionably, in places, heroic. It is not a matter of picking holes, of finding examples where British fishermen removed the engines from their boats, of the non-appearance of the Royal Air Force (who

did in fact fight, but at too high an altitude to be seen), of interpreting Hitler's order to halt the panzers as indicating that providence was on the British side, and a calm sea proving that God was British. The politicians and military leaders had in 1939 misread the situation, and they sent too small a group of military personnel and material into a battlefront in which their allies had already shown signs of incompetence, and Belgium and the Netherlands were too petrified to move or allow British and French troops entry through their borders to counter a German attack. The public, then and later, had to see this massive defeat as a victory.

The same technique of propaganda was used throughout the war when, for example, in the battle for Arnhem, Montgomery, against all common sense and advice sent some of the finest fighting troops to certain death and captivity, and at a time when such a sacrifice was hardly necessary. The acts of individual bravery and heroism let alone the fighting ability of the paratroopers made it easy for propaganda to treat this catastrophic defeat in the same vein as Dunkirk. The publicists concentrated the public mind on the individual bravery, and so avoided asking questions as to why these men had to be sacrificed in the first place or dare question the motives of the man who conceived such a flawed plan.

After the war the propaganda continued and changed shape according to the circumstances. The Nuremberg Trials and their subsequent proceedings were used by some elements as revenge, justified or otherwise, some saw it as a didactic scheme to help the defeated accept what had been done in their name. There were some in England who saw it as victor's justice, and they gave personal support for German military leaders such as Kesselring and Manstein. There were denazification courts in Germany, but by 1947 propaganda was changing direction. The perceived threat of Stalin's Soviet Union was ushering in the period of the Cold War, for many an extension of the Second World War. It suddenly became necessary to see West Germany as an ally, and after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 under the leadership of Adenauer, voted in by a single vote, the Allies now wooed the vanquished. Consequently, the Western war was suddenly declared a clean war; the news changed to the belief that the Wehrmacht had simply been good soldiers and had nothing to do with the holocaust and massacres. The SS became the scapegoat for both the Wehrmacht and the rest of Germany. Although Field Marshal Kesselring was condemned to death it was reduced to life imprisonment and he was released in 1952. The denazification courts were handed over to Germans, and they became a formality. Less than five years after the war the enemy had to be perceived as allies, and there was a sea-change in attitude brought about by subtle propaganda. It was not until nearly the end of the 20th

century that German historians such as Wette and others started to question whether the Wehrmacht had been innocent, and a major photographic exhibition in the mid-1990s, which demonstrated Wehrmacht guilt in war crimes was met with angry and a startled German public reaction.[4] Propaganda had done its work in the postwar period as effectively as it had done so on all sides during the war. The propaganda did not have to be generated in some political department, or through the subtle use of journalism, it happened out of the necessity of the changing political world and the *vox populi*.

Nor do these issues leave the public scene. On the 31st August 2019 there was on BBC Radio Four brief interviews with a Polish historian and the Polish Ambassador Arkady Rzwgocki about recalling the outbreak of the war against Poland eighty years ago.[5] Those attending this proposed event would be NATO countries and those involved in the "Eastern Partnership." The interviewer asked why the Russians had not been invited to participate in a commemoration in Warsaw on September 1st wondering whether it was because of the politics "of the moment." She was politely reminded that the Soviet Union had been part of that invasion, and then occupied Poland in the postwar period until its own collapse in 1989. The interviewer was also reminded that some five to six million Poles, and three million Polish Jews (90% of the Jewish population) had been annihilated during these years, a barbarity shared between the Nazi and Stalin regime. The Polish Ambassador adding that Polish cities, towns, and villages had been destroyed and there had been no appropriate recompense by Germany which he considered a moral issue. Much of this has been forgotten over the years by neglect or deliberate amnesia, and for much of Western Europe of minor concern. From the Polish national point of view, it remains important; elsewhere forgotten by time, or deliberately.

During the war and immediate postwar period historical facts became distorted, forgotten, or placed in the amnesia box. The enemy victories were depicted as only a temporary blip, Allied defeats were illustrated as victories of a sort, and events were given their own colour depending on the nationality of the writer. Stalin was regarded as a potential friend until the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact made it clear that he was the enemy which he then confirmed by his attack on Poland and Finland. Operation *Barbarossa* reversed the situation, and Stalin with the appropriate propaganda became Uncle Joe and the Katyń massacres were overlooked. By the end of the 1940s Stalin was no longer the friendly Uncle Joe, and the Cold War was in danger of heating up. As such a view of history is not only biased by some nationalistic historians, but also deeply influenced by events at the time of writing: even after the war there were reasons to distort what happened.

Memoirs and Autobiographies

Propaganda and hearsay were certainly assisted by immediate postwar literature. Generals on all sides wrote their memoirs and some, like Montgomery, even gave television appearances on how the war was won. Many were all too happy to enhance their reputations and their own importance. German generals such as Kesselring, Manstein, Guderian, Westphal, Senger, all wrote frank accounts, but with a subtlety which, on first reading, concealed their self-serving purpose of distancing themselves from the Nazi atrocities, and except for Kesselring, viewed Hitler as evil. They wrote about the military campaigns as if they were merely games of chess. In doing so they appealed to the Western public who had been obliged to admire German military efficiency. There remained the problem that "neither Western nor Russian opinion was willing to concede that man for man, or division for division, the Wehrmacht was superior to all its adversaries."[6] Although he was pro-Nazi when the Nazis were winning, Rommel, who had been Göbbels' special propaganda project, was equally admired by the Allied public and military leadership; Omar Bradley, in his autobiography even referring to him "as the champ." Rommel, who only left his papers, had his reputation enhanced by many respected Western historians. When Allied leaders wrote their memoirs it was all too easy and useful to praise the professionalism of German militarism; even Lord Alexander, when he heard his opponent Kesselring in Italy had been condemned to death for permitting or overlooking massacres, asked for remission on the grounds that Kesselring had fought a clean war. Alexander, the supreme gentleman was not playing a deliberate propaganda role, but it undoubtedly fitted the demands of the time that German Generals be released from prison if West Germany were to become an ally. It had become necessary to look back with tinted glasses to enhance the best and obscure the unpalatable.

Personality Enhancement

The war, as in all wars, frequently involved personalities on all sides, and the propaganda was often about the leaders. It has been claimed that war is an extension of politics, but all too often it is a certain type of ambitious character who dominates the politics of the day, and in war certain personalities create, control, dominate and benefit from the battlefield image. Much of this is self-evident with the political leaders; Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin were dictators who dominated their political scenes, Eisenhower, a military commander, rose to be President of the USA because

of the war, and de Gaulle, from a minor military role, rose to lead France. Although it was the twentieth century there was more cult-personality and legends than in the War of the Roses, which did not have the benefit of newspapers, radio, photographs and film. In the same way that incidents, events and the course of the war were viewed differently by nations and in different times, so the personalities have been seen in various lights.

Mussolini, *ll Duce*, the first fascist leader, who, following his March on Rome in 1922, and whose example gave Hitler inspiration in his abortive 1923 putsch, to all appearances seemed an outstanding success even garnering some praise from Churchill. The *persona* of the leader was critical. It was a period following the disaster of WWI when people were seeking hope in strong leadership. The Italian image of their *Duce* changed rapidly, and he and his mistress were shot by their own people and hanged upside down in downtown suburbia. He was not such a powerful enemy, limited by his own military machine, the monarchy and the Church, his grand desires to extend Italian influence and empire failed from the beginning because his military expertise proved disastrous, the military equipment was second rate, and many Italians had no desire for the war. It has always been necessary to see him as a formidable foe, but as the mists of time clear it is becoming more and more self-evident that Mussolini was not as wicked as Hitler, that although he was intelligent, he was so far out of his depth as to be a disaster. Much of his power evolved from his personality cult.

Hitler was surrounded by the world's best military professionals and created a serious cult of fear as well as respect, and it took many years, even after his death to erase his image. Many have claimed that Hitler almost had a mesmerising effect, even on his generals. In his book, *Exorcising Hitler,* Frederick Taylor carefully paints the torturous journey many German people had to go through in the postwar period, coming to terms with what the rest of the world regarded as the epitome of evil.[7] Stalin exercised a similar cult of domination and cruel repression, and even when he died in 1953 his closest associates had approached his dying body with abject fear.

Nevertheless, there were times when the West attempted to view Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin in a different light; there were times in the inter-war years when Mussolini was positively admired, and although Halifax thought Hitler was one of the hotel's porters, there was a belief that Hitler was a gentleman and could be trusted. England courted Stalin to stop a Russian German alliance, but the British negotiation team went by sea and without appropriate credentials. Then he became the enemy, but in no time at all Stalin was again courted, supported, and painted as a jovial companion in arms until after the war, when he reverted to the sinister communist Tsar of

the Soviet Bloc. Such had been the power of war-time propaganda that it took many years for some English and Europeans to see Stalin as anything but a hero: The Red Army Victories placed the USSR in a glorious light under which Stalin basked.

Both Churchill and Roosevelt as leaders of Western Democracies had to be concerned about their public and political adversaries, perhaps more than their personality image. Roosevelt managed to be re-elected on an isolationist promise, and Churchill, for a considerable time, was fighting the pro-Chamberlain lobby and fending off votes of no confidence. The myth that the politicians put their support behind Churchill, as did the Trade Unions, is utter nonsense. Nevertheless, both leaders, especially Churchill, took on the near role of military war lords, but democracy stopped Churchill at the height of his success, and Stalin was later staggered to find Clement Attlee had simply stepped into his shoes. Such was the image of the western leaders that on Roosevelt's death the Nazi leadership thought the war could be turned around.

Before, during and after the war Stalin “purged” his generals and many senior commanders. Hitler replaced them at a drop of a hat and brutally murdered those implicated in the July 20th plot; Churchill replaced many on grounds of sheer frustration. Yet all the national leaders were dependent on their various military commanders for the projection of their own personality leadership image. Mussolini waited for military success to ride his white horse through Alexandria, and in the postwar Moscow Victory Parade celebrations, Stalin insisted Zhukov took the honours at the parade on another white horse, which he knew often lost control. Churchill undoubtedly dismissed his North African commanders when they were, in his opinion, tardy; one time it occurred when he was sitting with Roosevelt and heard the embarrassing news of the fall of Tobruk.

The generals were subject to their war lords, in Russia and Germany with some fear or trepidation, but these commanders all created their own power bases and imagery. Their successes and personalities were frequently enhanced and published as war propaganda, and in the postwar years some images became legendary, some more in the realm of myth and need more analysis with the distancing from the more emotional times. The leading Italian commanders such as Cavallero, Ambrosio, Badoglio and Graziani had little opportunity to develop any military reputation, because they were more caught up in the complex politics of Italy changing from fascist state of neutrality to a co-belligerent. The famous German General Rommel was despised by a few colleagues who referred to him as the Swabian farmer, but with the active assistance of Göbbels held an almost international reputation as a great leader until the July 20th plot, when he was quietly put

down rather than damage a national icon. German commanders came and went, many were sacked several times, and by 1945 the only senior army commander not to have been sacked or put on the sick list was Kesselring, who will be explored in Chapter Ten.

Russian generals frequently sacrificed thousands of lives to gain the smallest of advantages in defence or attack, Stalin gave them little choice, and Hitler insisted not an inch be given, thus thousands were lost at Stalingrad. In the western democratic society life was not held so cheaply, but there were occasions when for personal glory of the military commander, men's lives were wasted. Some generals often obeyed outrageous if not immoral orders for the sake of their own reputation and safety.

As much as the Allies feared or admired men like Rommel or Guderian for their cut and thrust, so the Germans admired Patton. Time and time again Eisenhower and Bradley had to overlook Patton's indiscretions such as slapping the faces of shell-shocked and sick soldiers. What is little known is that Patton, who helped save the day at Bastogne, sent tanks and over three hundred men to rescue his son-in-law from a prison camp deep behind enemy lines. Not only did it fail, and most of the men were killed injured or taken captive, but his son-in-law was injured in the attempt, and this misconstrued mission made the next stage of the invasion difficult. Patton was such a forthright and outspoken person he put “his foot in it” time and time again, and in the immediate postwar months, with the tension growing between the West and East, it must almost have been a relief for the politicians when Patton died in a car accident, because there was the constant fear he would alienate the Russians. Generals Clark and Patton may be described as flamboyant characters, but in their pursuit of personal glory, lives were lost.

Patton disliked the British, as did Clark, but most particularly Patton's rivalry with Montgomery has become almost legendary. Their race to Messina in Sicily and their feud was almost paranoid. Montgomery, as with Patton and Clark, saw himself as a military messiah, and his immense egotism and attitudes alienated him from his American counterparts. Although seen as the victor in El Alamein, much of the footwork had been done by his sacked predecessors; his pursuit of Rommel along the North African coast was tardy; his operation in Sicily eventually won, but at a greater cost in lives than the Germans, who also managed to extricate themselves and equipment back to Italy without problems. He was slow working his way through Italy to Salerno; in Normandy his promise to take Caen in a few days caused many deaths, as did his plan for Market Garden. He is always portrayed by himself and the British as a great and successful

general, but at an immense cost in lives, the very thing he and others claimed he fought to avoid, and the reason often suggested for making him always too cautious, while many argue it was to avoid damaging his own self-perceived reputation.

His dislike of Patton helped underline the fact that the projected image of the closeness of Allied command was false. Alan Brooke in his diary made it clear that he thought the Americans knew next to nothing about waging a military campaign, and his opinion of Eisenhower was that he was simply the wrong man. Eisenhower was chosen because of his ability to get along with the British, but even he had exhausting problems with Montgomery. Many American commanders, especially Clark and Patton, saw the British as a collection of arrogant Colonel Blimps. The vain glorious Mark Clark ignored the order of his British Commander Alexander who was too much of a gentleman to bring him to task. Later the equally vain glorious Montgomery tried to claim Bastogne as his victory; it was a wonder how the Allied generals ever worked together without coming to blows. The Anglo-American alliance creaked from the very beginning as is generally known; the Churchill policy of winning the war through the Mediterranean soft underbelly, and the American insistence on crossing the channel for a direct confrontation is well known; but the image that the commanders fought as a single unit against the oppressive Nazi was important, but it is far from the truth: time and time again the tensions were formidable.

This introduction on the nature of propaganda, be it politically initiated, or by populist desire, or by film, autobiographies and the personality cult has changed little over the years. If anything the past eighty years since the declaration of war has enhanced much of the myth, obfuscated the reality, and a great deal of ignorance of events prevails and does not diminish; why else should a trained BBC interviewer wonder why the Poles had not asked for the Russians to be present to mark the anniversary of their invasion by Hitler and Stalin.

Blunders and Mistakes

Only the German Kriegsmarine ever questioned whether the Enigma code had been broken; the Germans considered it impossible and underestimated the ability of the enemy. The British SIS had hoped to contact anti-Nazi Generals only to fall into a trap at Venlo when they were snatched across the border. It was a German pilot who mistakenly crashed at Mechelen in Belgium while carrying German plans for the invasion of the West. The bombing of Rotterdam was regarded as barbaric, but Kesselring's later defence that the smoke concealed the red flares declaring

the cessation of ground hostilities carried some veracity; war does not always run according to plans. The adage that "the first victim of war is truth" has always been applicable to this day.*

In war mistake follows mistake, and this is understandable, but the human propensity to avoid the truth about mistakes and accidents even years later knows no bounds. The bombing of the Monte Cassino Abbey may have been an unnecessary act of vandalism, and it would have been justified had it saved life; but everyone failed to recognise that the rubble of the Abbey proved a better form of defence than a preserved medieval building. Operation *Market Garden* which included the fracas of Arnhem disregarded many necessary warnings, not least ignoring the Dutch intelligence information that there was a panzer battalion in the area. The near disasters of the sea-landings at Salerno and Anzac never taught sufficient lessons for the Normandy landings, and Omaha beach was a disaster, and the experts who had examined the beaches and cliffs from holiday snaps forgot about the heavy Normandy bocage type hedgerows, and the unlikeliness of taking Caen within a few days. Mussolini's underestimation of Greek resistance to his invasion was dwarfed by Hitler's belief that the Soviet Union could be overrun even as winter approached.

The failure by the Axis to take Malta, the Allied caution which allowed Rommel time to escape along the North African coast after El Alamein, the tragedy of mounting the raid on Dieppe, Hitler's insistence that jet-fighters be used as bombers, the virtual loss of an entire Baltic convoy, giving time to allow the German to have their own mini-Dunkirk across the Messina Straits of Sicily, the taking of Rome and by doing so to allow an entire German army to escape, are all tips of an iceberg of errors, misjudgement, and sheer blunders. Sometimes these mistakes and blunders were made by politicians and sometimes by individual military leaders, and they have all been examined in serious history books, but they are frequently glossed over by myth and legend, justified in autobiographies, and missed in too many national type histories and glorified in films.

One of the most popular war films was *The Bridge too Far* directed by Richard Attenborough in 1977 which received many accolades, and of course, the necessary criticisms, mainly based on cinematography grounds. It was reasonably realistic, but it continued the Dunkirk theme, almost a speciality of the British, of creating a heroic feature out of a devastating defeat. It mentioned errors of judgement, but it managed to keep Montgomery's reputation reasonably "clean," but above all, like so many

* Many have claimed this was uttered by a Senator Hiram Warren in 1918, but it probably goes back to Aeschylus a Greek of the 4th-5th centuries BC.

popular films, glorified war by creating more myth and legend. They portrayed the reality of fighting with plenty of blood and gore, but failed to ask why it had ever been launched as a campaign in the first place; was it a pure gamble, did Montgomery really think it would succeed, or was he just trying to beat his implacable enemy General Patton across the Rhine? The populist view of past events is not history which is probably why Bernard Shaw's quip "that what we learn from history is that we don't learn."

This book contains a series of chapters of varying lengths which scrutinise a selected example of events, blunders, accidents, battles, campaigns, military leaders, political machinations across Europe which happened and which have grown varying myths, legends, with gross exaggerations attached to them in the popular mind; and even aspects which have been either neglected, forgotten, or placed in an official amnesia bin. It is an effort to look at the reality of what happened and not mere hearsay.

Overview of Book

This exploration has selected a few features of World War Two to examine them in the light of reality, compared to the hearsay which enshrouds them in popular thinking. It will outline incidents of blunders and accidents which have been frequently overlooked, forgotten, or re-interpreted to give a better perspective, and the problem of what might be described as the blame game. There will be some who might say this exhibits a degree of cynicism, but cynics are realists, and realism is the object of this book; for some the book will be contentious. The exploration will look at the way hearsay or past events become historical myths, the way blunders and accidents are subsumed in the broader picture, and the way many acclaimed leaders turned themselves into a personality cult, *prima donnas*, and frequently, as a result caused unnecessary deaths. The two longer chapters on France and the Italian campaign encapsulate all these features of blunders, mistakes, accidents, poor leadership, other chapters are shorter and deal with specific incidents.

The book's opening chapter starts with what may be described as an international blunder which highlighted the human propensity of the blame game; which implies it was always the fault of the enemy. The first short chapter dealing with the **Treaty of Versailles**, which could be argued was one of the major determinants which meant the 1914-18 was not the war to end war, but a mere truce creating a century of conflict. The French General Ferdinand Foch, who was a military theorist claimed at the time that it was merely a truce, and many hold the view that the war did not finally end until 1989-90 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Versailles Treaty was a

form of victor's justice, or rather a victor's blunder, with disagreeable results.

The second chapter is longer and explores the way reality was transformed from hearsay into myth in the **History of France** during this period. All nations have a past in which they chose to regard themselves in a favourable light. The French, who have yet to produce an official war history, have dark memories of Vichy France with its anti-Semitism, and compliance with the invader often called "collaboration." There is also the memory of the failure to defend themselves; yet the average Frenchman or Italian are no more cowardly than any man from any other nation, and so French history concentrates on the bravery of the Resistance, which is part of their collective memory. This chapter on French history and the way it is regarded in the passing of time, places a significant gap between the reality of the events and what is believed today. This process of rewriting French history was started by de Gaulle as he rebuilt the honour and dignity of France from his perspective as a proud French military man and eventual political leader. The defeat, collaboration, anti-Semitism, were dark moments for France, and with skilful memory choice the efforts of the small resistance, despite its problems, was elevated to that of victors in a "fighting France."

The third chapter concerns the **Italian Campaign** which is surveyed because it gives so many examples of poor overall strategy, weak tactics, blunders, and indicates that the generals in charge were all too often building up their own personal portfolios at the cost of men's lives. Later some of these generals would write self-justifying autobiographies, and this would be supported by the nation because of pure nationalism and the need for justification. When General Mark Clark appeared before a postwar Congressional Hearing about sending too many men to their deaths; it evaporated because of national prestige and the nation needed heroes. Italy has been the selected example of a campaign because in encapsulates so much of what was happening elsewhere. It seemed appropriate to follow this chapter with a brief examination of some international hearsay that the **Italian soldier tended to be cowardly**. This explosive nonsense is explored in order to put the notion into an appropriate context. Italian soldiers have frequently been the butt of many unpleasant and unfair jokes about cowardice in battle, for attacking Britain and France when it was safe and changing sides when it became dangerous. This had much to do with the "see-sawing state of mind" of Mussolini according to his son-in-law Ciano's diary, and as with the Germans it was not a democratic decision.[8] The Italians had few resources, poor military equipment, a weak officer class, appalling leadership, and many opposed the war. They surrendered to a

small British army in massive numbers and gained the unwarranted reputation as having no stomach for fighting. The Italians were more than aware of this and often compensated by looking back with a degree of pride to their partisan movement.

Chapter Five will examine why the largest European Army of France, with British aid collapsed and **France defeated**, it will also explore the myths and subsequent popular depiction of **Dunkirk**. When the British following their defeat had to flee from Dunkirk it was simply because they were too small and ill-equipped to face a well-prepared and an already experienced Germany military, which used speed and surprise by combining tanks and air power. The British and French failures were political and military, but the British escape from the French shores was "pumped up" as a victory, the unusually quiet English Channel over these days was interpreted as Divine help, and films and books have continued this theme; only serious historians have looked to the actual disastrous facts. The myth of Dunkirk being a form of British triumph continues to grow in conversation and films.

Chapter Six will explore the infamous disaster of the raid on **Dieppe**. This will examine the part played by Mountbatten who created his own cult and was a *prima donna,* who helped create what can only be described as a blunder of catastrophic proportions. Mountbatten still tends to be held highly in the opinion of the *vox populi*, and the raid on Dieppe for years quite rightly carried the sense of heroism, but in the cold light of dawn it was a waste of human life for personal aggrandisement. As such Mountbatten's role is further explored again in the final chapter.

Subterfuge and accidents exist in any conflict and occupy chapters Seven and Eight, with the latter chapter dealing with the disaster of the exposure to gas bombs at Bari. The issues which makes these two subjects of interest are the way they have been reported. Often accidents are all but covered up, or neglected by nationalistically inclined historians, and the story of Intelligence and subterfuge too often suffers the same fate. The need to be regarded as the main victors or victims was often equated with holding some sort of claim for a place on the moral high ground. If the situation were not self-evident then propaganda was used in some instances, popular myth in others, otherwise it was neglected, overlooked and forgotten. When there were outright mistakes, blunders, misjudgements, and accidents which could have been avoided, then the same apparatus of propaganda, official or popular was often utilised. There is of course, an endless list of such occurrences, and they are not confined to any one nation, and arise in varying forms, shapes, and with varying ramifications.

The **blame game** and hypocrisy of war is explored in Chapter Nine using the war at sea to examine this issue. The battles at sea have been coloured both during and after the event. It was not so much the few battles between the well-known battleships, but the British fight for survival from the U-boat war. The U-boats are nearly always painted as the sinister lurking enemy, sinking vessels from the safety of being hidden beneath the waves, with the U-boats then surfacing and machine-gunning survivors and leaving the rest to drown. Depriving the British Isles of food supplies was also painted as somewhat underhand. Yet, during the Phoney War the British had hoped to repeat the success of the Great War by blockading and starving Germany. The British submariners were treated as heroes and fighting against the odds. The British and later the American submarine service abided by the same rules, simply because it was dangerous for a submarine to surface or stay in the same area too long. It was different for surface battleships, and the German battleship the *Graf Spee* had its supply escort vessel the *Altmarck* in the area to take on board any survivors. German behaviour in the U-boat war was condemned at Nuremberg and Dönitz was imprisoned partly as a result of this so-called immoral conduct. This was victor's justice because other Allied naval officers were surprised at the verdict and the sentence, because their battle tactics had been the same. The U-boat war has been painted by propaganda as vicious, and the Nuremberg trial appeared to justify this claim. It was not until a Wolfgang Peterson released the film *Das Boot* about U-boat 96 in 1981 that the public had a clearer view of U-boat warfare, and the bravery of the crews. The U-boat men died in greater proportion than any other of the armed services. In terms of allied propaganda, they were just villains. In fact, a few may have been, but most were sailors at war and their tactics, strategy and behaviour were not just German, but British and American as well. Chapter Nine will examine the currents myths and the reality of this type of warfare.

The final chapters of Ten and Eleven will look at some **military leadership** during this conflict. Chapter ten will explore the German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, regarded as a brilliant leader in defence, yet despite his good reputation amongst some Allied generals, he was sentenced to death as a war criminal, but because of Cold War exigencies it was commuted, and he was soon released. The final chapter looks at the danger of *prima donnas* and the cult personality of some Allied generals. Some of this was covered in the Italian Campaign in Chapter Three, with a passing exploration of the American General Mark Clark. This chapter explores others such as Brooke, Mountbatten, de Gaulle, Eisenhower, Alexander, Montgomery and Patton.

Among the Western Allies some commanders had their own PR office of journalists and photographers within their retinue to enhance their image, either for promotional, political or long-term historical or political motives. The American General Mark Clark (sometimes known by his subordinates during the Italian campaign as *Marcus Aurelius Clarkus*) always carried a formidable entourage of photographers and journalists, who were instructed only to photograph him from a certain angle. He tried to establish himself as the conqueror of Rome, only to be disappointed that next day when the Normandy landings stole his limelight in the press. His overwhelming desire to be remembered as the victor of Rome led him to disobeying orders in allowing an entire German army to escape, perpetuating the war in Italy for many more months and involving thousands of deaths. He was one among many in being more interested in his place in history, or a political future, and this egotistical approach was a prominent feature of many military commanders and cost the loss of many soldiers.