“We in our haste can only see the small components of the scene,” conceded one poet of the Second World War, writing about the predicament of Second World War poetry itself: “We cannot tell what incidents will focus on the final screen.” Seeing the big picture of a war that stretched across the globe was avowedly difficult at the time, and, notwithstanding the perspective supplied by our seventy years of distance, it remains so. What this book aims to do is to give a sense of those “components of the scene” directly witnessed by individual participants across the globe and reconstructed by onlookers who wrote after the event. All the same, and as many chapters of this book will demonstrate, what the poet calls “the final screen” necessarily remains elusive: as with any historical event and its representations, World War II and its literature are still subject to revision in the light of changing cultural priorities, needs, and interests. There is no definitive way of summing up for all time what the war meant for literature, although we hope to show in this volume at least how it looks in our own time.

“War’s being global meant that it ran off the edges of maps,” wrote the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen in her novel of wartime espionage, The Heat of the Day (1948): “it was uncontainable.” Here Bowen is describing the impossibility of keeping in mind the multiple locations of a war on and around the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific Oceans, a war fought in deserts and jungles, on seas, fields, plains, and familiar city streets. “Where is the front?” Leo Mellor asks in his chapter on war reportage, responding to that contemporary sense that World War II had rendered inadequate, even entirely irrelevant, long-held assumptions about where – which is to say, how – wars are fought. The major challenge facing any synoptic account of World War II is how to convey the war’s totally unprecedented geographical scope and the crushing totality with which it managed to turn into a battleground everything it touched. Devastating and deadly though it undoubtedly was, the Great War of 1914–18 can seem more like a European Civil War in comparison. The terrifying hints it gave of what total world war looks like would be realized in its successor.
World War II is “uncontainable,” to use Bowen’s word, for reasons of time as well as space. It perhaps gives some sense of the difficulty of generalizing about the war to note that even the seeming stability of its dates – 1939–45 – obscures as much as it contains. For the British, certainly, the war began in 1939, two days after Germany invaded Poland on September 1, and formally ended on September 2, 1945, when the Japanese signed the instrument of surrender three weeks after the United States used the atomic bomb against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Having begun only when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor at the very end of 1941, the American war was substantially shorter than the one fought between Britain and Germany, although the war in the Far East began much earlier still, with Japanese aggression against China early in the 1930s. Back in Europe, Germany had already annexed Austria in 1938, and the war would begin that year also for Czechoslovakia, a small, prosperous democracy created after the Great War, when Hitler used the promise of peace to bribe and bully France and Britain into allowing Czechoslovakia to be partitioned (prefatory to a German takeover) in the Munich Agreement of September 1938. And, while 1945 brought the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan, for many of the countries brutalized by the Axis powers, liberation would be the prelude to civil war. In many cases, too, five years of Nazi occupation would give way to almost five decades of Soviet domination, when two former Allies, the US and the USSR, dramatically parted company and the endings of World War II shaded into the beginnings of the Cold War. This sense that the war massively exceeded the parameters of its official dating was what the English novelist E. M. Forster implied when he wrote in 1951 of “the war which began for Great Britain in 1939, although earlier elsewhere, and which is still going on.”

And then there were the wars within the war. Robert Gordon begins his chapter on the Italian war by pointing out that Italy fought multiple wars, first with the Germans and then against them. France also had a very different war from those fought by Britain and America: the French entered the war with the British in September 1939 but laid down their arms in 1940, in that cataclysmic summer when the Germans conquered most of Europe. By the end of June 1940, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Norway had all fallen to the Germans, who were then poised to invade Britain (they had reached the English Channel in May). For those countries that made their coerced peace with Germany, the fighting war was short but the experience of occupation would be long and brutal. The different kinds of war that World War II encompassed affect its literature in profound ways. So, for example, Debarati Sanyal’s chapter emphasizes the importance of questions of collaboration, engagement, and resistance in the French literature of the war – questions that the unoccupied British did not have to ask. They had
questions of their own, though: as James Dawes, Margot Norris, Rod Mengham, and Adam Piette show in their discussions of British and American poetry and fiction, the Anglo-American experience of total war would give rise to vital questions about the nature of citizenship, democracy, and belonging, while, as Donna Coates shows in her discussion of war writing from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, Britain’s “war for democracy” looked substantially different again from the perspective of those former colonies that had joined the fight.

But this is not simply a book about the literary works that record the Allies’ experiences of war. The chilling atrocities carried out by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan made it easy for the war to slide into cultural memory in excessively simplified forms. Despite the fact that Britain and America have fought numerous wars since 1945, World War II remains a kind of gold standard for “just war” – an obvious contrast with World War I, which found its place in cultural memory as a tragic and obscene mess for everyone concerned. And although the Holocaust only accrued its current cultural importance decades after the war (because notwithstanding Churchill’s undoubtedly sincere horror when news emerged of the Nazi genocide, saving the European Jews was not an Allied priority), it only reinforces the Anglo-American temptation to mythologize World War II as an epic struggle of good against evil. But the most important claim literature can make on our historical imaginations is to show how things felt at the time, and while I suspect it would take a criminally perverse form of historical revisionism to suggest that World War II was anything other than a war that the Allies had to win, looking beyond the trans-historical simplifications of “good against evil” offers us essential historical insight into the real experiences of the real people – British and American, French and Russian, German, Italian, and Japanese – who lived through it. That Germany and Japan surely had to be defeated scarcely means that their citizens did not suffer in wars waged on their behalf. Nor should history exact as unofficial reparations their enduring silence about their war experiences.

A recurring theme in the chapters that follow is the direct and indirect means by which literary witness is delayed – and many of the important works of World War II literature were in fact only written or published well after 1945 – or even silenced altogether. Katharine Hodgson’s chapter on war writing from the USSR describes the gaping disparity between the lived experiences of Soviet soldiers and the Soviet party line, which required that all credit for the “great patriotic war” be attributed to the Soviet leadership. For war writers in the USSR, pushing hard at the boundaries of censorship in the effort to reflect conditions at the front to readers back home, the war fueled hopes of freedom of expression that were not to be realized in their own
time. Of course censorship may be externally as well as internally imposed: Dagmar Barnouw’s chapter on the German war experience opens in the stunned, wordless ruins of the bombed German cities of 1945; she and Reiko Tachibana emphasize the effects of censorship in the war’s immediate aftermath, when a defeated Germany and Japan were under Allied occupation. At the very moment when American writers were starting to write and publish such future classics of modern war fiction as The Naked and the Dead and the other essential war novels James Dawes discusses in his chapter, German and Japanese writers found that their war experiences were both literally and figuratively unspeakable. In 1950, for example, the future Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll could find no publisher for his tellingly titled first novel The Silent Angel, which would eventually be published only posthumously. This is a novel about a German soldier returned from war; he is a member of, in Böll’s own words, “the generation which has ‘come home,’ a generation that knows there is no home for them on this earth.” German and Japanese war experiences were unspeakable not only in the familiar, colloquial sense that there seemed no words to describe destruction on such an unprecedented scale (Dresden, Hamburg, Berlin, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki), but also politically unspeakable initially because their countries were occupied by the victorious Allied powers, and, in the longer run, because of the moral difficulty of saying anything that could be construed as “we suffered too” – which risks eliciting the response that, first, “they” brought it on themselves, and, second, that the crimes committed against them were dwarfed by those committed in their name.

Even writers in democracies, comparatively free to describe their war experiences both at the time and afterwards, worried about what could really be said, mindful as they were of the degrading effects of war on the integrity of descriptive language. In a famous essay published just after the war, and very clearly marked by the atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s, of the war and its grim aftermath in Europe, George Orwell protested the euphemisms, deceptions, and falsifications of public speech, singling out new phrasings formulated in order to avoid “calling up mental pictures” of the violent acts to which they refer:

Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers.5

No wonder wartime Europe should have provided the historical basis of Orwell’s invention of “Newspeak” in Nineteen Eighty-Four, a totalitarian language that aims to reduce the possibilities of thought by minimizing and
homogenizing the vocabulary available to its speakers. From Orwell’s point of view, though, the problem for language was not solely a matter of totalitarianism’s notorious euphemisms (“final solution,” “liquidation,” and so on), but the problem of what happens to speech everywhere in times of political crisis, at all moments when the unjustifiable has to be justified through a vocabulary that renders invisible the brutally violent phenomena it purports to name. The prosecution of war, infamously, depends on a referential minimalism akin to Newspeak—“casualties,” “collateral damage,” “strategic withdrawal,” and “displaced persons” are among the many phrasings we use to name and avoid the unbearable. With this in mind, you could say that the strongest moral claim that the literature of World War II makes on our attention lies in its power to restore the devastating experiential realities that official languages conceal. Even so, it gives some indication of the extraordinary challenges that literary art faced—the trite “unspeakable” so often attached to the experience of war is sometimes more meaningful than its familiarity makes it sound—to mention here that the contributors in this collection will occasionally turn to film in an effort to convey those experiences of World War II that literature struggled to voice.

An important difficulty of expression unique to writers in democracies emerges in the tension between their general support for the war and their total unwillingness to submit to the uncritical, exclusionary, and blinkered forms of patriotism that war tends to elicit, in their time as in ours. As the British poet Cecil Day Lewis wrote in his “Where are the War Poets?” (1943), it was “no subject for immortal verse / that we who lived by honest dreams / defend the bad against the worse.”6 Nor could sensitive onlookers ignore such vicious ironies, not to say outright hypocrisies, as those World War II cast up: late imperial Britain newly casting itself as the guardian and champion of small nations’ sovereignty; Allies deploying a racially segregated military to wage war on poisonously racist foreign regimes; Stalinist judges on the bench trying the Germans for particular crimes of which the Soviet regime was also notoriously guilty. The enduring legacy of literary responses to World War II is less a vindication of Allied righteousness than a demonstration of what it means to support a war in a genuinely clear-sighted and critical way.

Forster defined Orwell’s patriotism as the belief that “all nations are odious but some are less odious than others.”7 Forster might have been describing himself as well as Orwell, and their move towards a highly critical patriotism during the war is entirely representative of a whole generation or two of writers. Passionate liberals though they were, both of them instinctively hostile to the idea that writers should ever become mouthpieces for the state, even Forster and Orwell would broadcast for the BBC during the war,
Forster writing and delivering anti-Nazi broadcasts that aimed to explain why, as he put it in 1940, “we have got to go on with this hideous fight,” and Orwell trying to elicit support for Britain from an extremely restless (and soon to be independent) India. In “R.A.F.,” a poem based on her experience of living in London during the Battle of Britain, even the American modernist poet H.D. turned – British – patriot: “I award myself / some inch of ribbon,” she writes, in solidarity with the endangered pilots. It turns out that the courage for which she decorates herself is the courage needed to witness evil prosper while brave, good airmen fall.

The American Allen Tate gently mocked this shift from the private ennui of interwar modernists to their public-spiritedness in wartime when he wrote in one of his own war poems of “[s]pirits grown Eliotic, / Now patriotic.” As Adam Piette points out in his chapter on British poetry of the war, one of the interesting, albeit potentially confusing, aspects of the material is that public feeling is often more resonant than the private feelings usually associated with lyric poetry.

Which is not to say, of course, that writers necessarily embraced the erosion of the private and the individual, the insidious infiltration of the war into all spheres of life during years when, in the words of one American war poet, “The private life is small; And individual men / Are counted not at all.” The hateful effects of enforced sociality, the exorbitant claims of the state, and the diminution of the private life were often noted, and by writers of all nationalities. In his autobiographical WWII: A Chronicle of Soldiering, the American novelist James Jones, author of The Thin Red Line and From Here to Eternity, described in detail how military life aimed systematically to erode individuality – through “the discipline, the daily humiliations, the privileges of ‘brutish’ sergeants” – in order to make the soldier feel that he is “as dispensable as the ships and guns and tanks and ammo he himself serves and dispenses,” or “a nameless piece of expendable matériel.” These resentments at the demands of institutional life are described in Dawes’s discussion of Jones and other American novelists of his generation, and what you absolutely don’t find in the writing of soldiers and veterans is any self-righteous retrospective conviction about good clean wars that kill sixty million people; rather, only an ironic appraisal of what one war poet mordantly called “an approved early death / under the national aegis.” And although Germany’s aggressive war aims obviously supplied an altogether different rationale for fighting from those given to Allied combatants, the war veteran Böll spoke for many of his generation, German and non-German, when at the very end of his life he wrote that “soldiers – and I was one – shouldn’t complain about the people they’ve been sent to fight against, only about those who sent them there.” His early novella The Train was on Time
(1949) is a forceful indictment of nationalism rendered from the point of view of a terrified and unwilling young German conscript on his way to die on the brutal Eastern Front.

Still, with its awarding of “an inch of ribbon” to the civilian onlooker, H. D.’s “R.A.F.” reminds us of the importance of inclusiveness in our definitions of the literature of World War II. The soldiers of the two world wars may have been largely conscripts, but they were soldiers nonetheless; World War II, on the other hand, was very substantially a civilian experience, and, in the eloquent words of the historian Tony Judt, “experienced not as a war of movement and battle but as a daily degradation, in the course of which men and women were betrayed and humiliated, forced into daily acts of petty crime and self-abasement, in which everyone lost something and many lost everything.”¹⁵ The writing discussed in this volume includes work by combatants and non-combatants, soldiers and civilians. World War II was a total war and, as the later chapters of this book insist, no literary imagination went unaffected. It is with this in mind that Gill Plain uses British women writers as a case study, surveying how this exemplary non-combatant group – British women constituting a representative group because they could not fight in the war but could certainly be killed by it – responded to the claims of state and nation during the war; while Lyndsey Stonebridge explains why the idea of trauma so central to discussions of World War II and its literature (and trauma theory itself largely arose out of considerations of mid-century writing) requires us to think more obliquely about whom war affects and how. Following on from Stonebridge’s emphasis on questions of indirection and the disrupted chronologies of “latency,” the final chapter of this collection explains how and why the war continues to affect the literary imagination; in this concluding chapter Petra Rau surveys fictional accounts of the war written in the last thirty years, novels produced by those who did not experience the war at first hand. This is the trajectory of the book, then: we begin with surveys of the British and American materials likely to be most familiar to students of Anglophone war writing, and then go on to encompass international perspectives on the war; this last section of the book invites us to think more inclusively about what constitutes the literature of World War II.

“Composition on the subject of decomposition?” asked the Ukrainian Holocaust survivor Piotr Rawicz in his Blood from the Sky (1961), a powerful experimental novel about the round up of the Eastern European Jews in the early years of the war.¹⁶ This question is at the heart of our collective enterprise. What does composition on the subject of decomposition really look like? What form could be adequate to the task of
representing a world destroyed? Rawicz’s novel is one of the many texts the war produced that test the limits of representation; many others are discussed in this book. Thus, for example, Phyllis Lassner’s chapter on life writing and the Holocaust describes how Holocaust literature confounds our familiar reading conventions and expectations; Leo Mellor describes the literariness and studied anti-literariness of Anglo-American reportage; and James Dawes’s discussion of the American war novel describes the formal transformations that war generates when it turns the world upside down.

And war is nothing if not an overturning of collective and humanistic hopes and values. “Courage smashes a cathedral,” Graham Greene marveled in his novel of the London Blitz, The Ministry of Fear (1943), and “endurance lets a city starve.”17 “Observe in what an original world we are living,” wrote the Polish wartime political prisoner Tadeusz Borowski: “how many men can you find in Europe who have never killed; or whom somebody does not wish to kill?”18 These writers were compelled to give voice to the unprecedentedly violent and the often senselessly cruel, and, although the literature of World War II can be resistant to generalization, it would be true to say that one of its widely shared tendencies is a questioning of the adequacy of literature to convey the magnitude of what it records. “Less said the better,” is the diffident opening line of John Pudney’s wartime elegy, “Missing”: “Words will not fill the post / Of Smith, the ghost.”19 In this poem about an airman shot down over the ocean, what is “missing” is not simply the much-missed Smith, but also the writer’s faith in the capacity of poetic language to describe and acknowledge that loss adequately.

So the eloquence of World War II writing is essentially a kind of anti-eloquence, and it is no less powerful and moving for all that. Although it is impossible to agree with Pudney that “the less said the better,” especially in view of the vast and extraordinary archive his contemporaries have bequeathed us, any claim for the redeeming and compensatory power of literary art has to be humble and hesitant in the face of a war that spanned the globe, destroyed a continent, and killed sixty million people; a war whose consequences Europe had to live out so painfully and visibly for half a century, and which are, we rather suspect, still part of our own lives. The deservedly admired American war correspondent Martha Gellhorn supplies words that could serve as the epigraph to any account of this war’s literature when she introduces her World War II journalism with an admission of failure: “These articles are in no way adequate descriptions of the indescribable misery of war. War was always worse than I knew how to say – always.”20
NOTES

PART I

Anglo-American texts and contexts