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Volume I: Fighting the War  
Edited by John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley  
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[More information](#)

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## General introduction

EVAN MAWDSLEY

The Second World War, terrible in its course and far-reaching in its consequences, was the most complex event of the twentieth century. This three-volume history of the global conflict brings together the work of an international team of nearly eighty experts, men and women at different stages in their careers, but with a level of scholarship that is consistently first-class. A collection of substantial article-length chapters, the *Cambridge History of the Second World War* (CHSWW) provides a comprehensive and authoritative treatment of the war and its context.

As a large-scale collective history of the Second World War, the project is ambitious and innovative, taking a comprehensive view of all aspects of the conflict. The very broad scope of the CHSWW means that military operations and diplomatic interaction can be considered alongside political, economic, social and cultural developments. The historical context and legacy of the war, up to the present day, are also fully considered. The CHSWW has been written in the second decade of the twenty-first century and takes into account changes in the configuration of world power and in the nature of warfare. This vantage point also allows an approach to the history of the Second World War which is less complicated by Nationalist or Cold War polemics. Although the majority of the contributors are historians working in Europe and North America, the perspective of the project is genuinely global, in particular giving appropriate weight to the Asian participants in the war.

There is no single self-evident way to package the vast subject of the Second World War, and the arrangement of three volumes is inevitably arbitrary. Nevertheless, the CHSWW has a broadly logical structure. Volume 1, *Fighting the War*, deals with the directly 'military' aspects of war. It includes chapters discussing the national wartime strategies of the major states, which resulted from geographical, political, economic and historical factors, and the specific

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[More information](#)

EVAN MAWDSLEY

military instruments available. Other chapters lay out, in broad-brush terms, what happened in the war's major campaigns, both in Europe and Asia, and consider why one side prevailed over the other. The final part of this volume looks in transnational terms at aspects of the armed forces of the era, covering themes from war planning to the treatment of prisoners of war.

Volume II, *Politics and Ideology*, goes beyond military strategy, operations and instruments, and the work of military elites. On the one hand, this volume covers broader national (and international) 'policy' and ideology, in an attempt to clarify what it was that the leaders of various states were attempting to achieve before and during the war, and how political elites tried to rally or compel support from their populations, or were themselves subject to the pressure of public opinion. Diplomacy was also an extremely important aspect of the war, despite the evident failure of statesmen to head off aggression by Japan, Italy and Germany in the 1930s; despite the Allied concept of 'unconditional surrender'; and despite the fact that the fighting was ended in the summer of 1945 only by the most extreme military means. The building and maintenance of alliances was, in fact, a crucial part of grand strategy on both sides. Meanwhile, one basic dynamic of the Second World War, examined in depth in this volume, was the attempt by individual states to extend their control into neighbouring states, or into regions controlled before the war by other states. This was done for economic, strategic or ethnocentric reasons, and it was done on a much greater scale than in any previous war. Expansion and annexation raise the related and extremely significant themes of occupation and resistance. Perhaps the most important single consequence of the Second World War was national liberation, not only in the obvious sense of delivering populations from Axis occupiers, but also ending, immediately or within a few years of 1945, the direct colonialist systems of the European powers and Japan.

The scope of Volume III, *Total War: Economy, Society and Culture*, is also broad and ambitious. Economic factors, especially pressure to obtain natural resources, were undoubtedly one of the basic causes of the conflict. At the same time – paradoxically or consequentially – the effective mobilization by the Allies of their greater national economic and technological potential was also one of the reasons why they eventually prevailed. (The Axis Powers, starting from a position of perceived inferiority, were trying to 'catch up'; they failed to do so, fought the war from their weaker position, and lost.) The pressure for economic mobilization in 'total war' also had profound social consequences, which are discussed in several chapters. Part III of Volume III considers other implications of total war in the realm of morality

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

and culture. The final part of the volume looks at the consequences of the Second World War, both in the immediate post-war years, where it had a decisive impact on 'the new world order', and in the decades to 2015, still reached by its long shadow.

The *CHSWW* trilogy is a collective work, and the sum of its parts. Each volume was put together by a team of co-editors, who tried to ensure adequate, but non-overlapping coverage, and who played the larger part in organizing their volume and commissioning contributions. Near eighty contributors, specialists in a very broad range of subjects, have given their interpretations. Despite a certain amount of discussion at conferences connected with the *CHSWW* project, and directly with editors, the content remains, first of all, the view of the individual contributors.

Not many people will read the *CHSWW* trilogy like a novel or a textbook, from beginning to end. Nevertheless, there was discussion at an early stage about the order of the volumes. It was tempting to begin with the various political, social, economic and cultural underpinnings or causes of the conflict – race, imperial rivalry, ethology, personal ambition, historical context and so on (in effect, what is currently in Volume II and parts of Volume III) – and only *after that* to look at the details of the resulting war, with its military forces and campaigns. There was also a chronological case for this, to begin with the pre-war diplomacy and international crises in order to establish causes of the Second World War, and only then to move forward to the actual fighting. Instead, the series jumps off with the military aspects and campaigns, and moves into the political and diplomatic in Volume II, and the economic and social in Volume III. Moreover, although the approach of the whole series is broadly transnational, Volume I also starts by using the individual nation states (or, rather, eight major nation states) as the units of conflict.

The justification for all this is that the *CHSWW* is the history of a *war*, a particular event, although one that lasted an agonizingly long time and took in vast – nearly global – territory. It is not an account of all aspects of world history in the middle decade of the twentieth century. This was a war that was fought between states with particular interests and ideologies. It also greatly mattered who won, although it was not simply a struggle of good versus evil. In addition, because we are so interested in the transformative political, social and economic effects of war, we need to look first at the military events and pressures that caused those effects. It makes sense, for example, to consider occupation, resistance and liberation *after* the military campaigns that enabled the military forces of one state to occupy the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

EVAN MAWDSLEY

territory of another. We need not worry too much about start and end dates for the *CHSWW* (or for the Second World War), as they differed for each of the states involved. The war began in 1937 in China, and the notion of the Second World War as essentially a component of a thirty-year-long ‘German wars’ is too Eurocentric, although elements of continuity and patterns of development certainly existed.

Why write a large-scale history of the Second World War now? It is the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war in 2015, but is that in itself sufficient justification? There is an abiding interest in the history of various aspects of the war by the general reading public – or, at least, by those who still frequent bookshops – judging by the books on sale about the Second World War. University students, too, find the history of the war a compelling subject, and new books are important for each new generation of readers. The *CHSWW* is not a textbook, handbook or encyclopaedia,<sup>1</sup> but it does provide bibliographical essays about the most recent research upon which the various chapters are based.

Is there anything new to be said about the Second World War? On the military side there was an important development in the 1970s and 1980s, when information about special intelligence (ULTRA) became available, but even that development is now twenty to twenty-five years old.<sup>2</sup> After that, however, with the loosening of censorship in Moscow in the late 1980s and 1990s, much better information became available about Stalinism and the conduct of Russia’s ‘Great Patriotic War’; and the Russian archives also provided access to important captured German documents. Understanding Nazi Germany is of great importance. In the 1990s there was a greater sense of Wehrmacht complicity in war crimes, and overall a very much clearer awareness of the German side of things, thanks to the appearance – and translation into English – of the numerous volumes of the outstanding semi-official history *Germany and the Second World War*.<sup>3</sup> In the last two decades there has been a better sense of the role of China in the war; for a long time

1 For an excellent multi-author survey of the historiography, see Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois (eds.), *A Companion to World War II* (2 vols., Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). As a short specialised encyclopaedia, I. C. B. Dear and M. R. D. Foot (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 1995), remains valuable.

2 The most important publication dealing with this was F. H. Hinsley et al. (eds.), *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations* (4 vols., London: HMSO, 1979–90).

3 *Germany and the Second World War* (10 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990–), originally published in German as *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (10 vols., Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979–2008). Two volumes remain to be translated.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*General introduction*

the role of that huge country in the Second World War had been ignored, discounted or misunderstood in the West. At the same time, Chinese-Japanese disputes about the history of a war which began nearly eighty years ago remain politically sensitive.

Changing generations live in a changing world, and every change shifts our perspective. We no longer live in the heroic age of the early 1940s. The Cold War and the European Community rebooted the orientation of alliances. The Suez crisis in 1956 displayed the weakness of the old imperial European states. The Vietnam War demonstrated both limits to American staying power and the potential of wars of national liberation (the features of asymmetrical warfare were also evident in Iraq in 2003–10). In the last twenty years we have seen the end of Communism in the Soviet Union and the emergence of a genuinely independent Eastern Europe, a region over whose fate the Second World War was notionally fought; Yugoslavia has been shattered. China has enjoyed an astonishing economic rise, matched to some extent by its military power. American and Japanese power had been in relative decline. The nature of warfare has changed profoundly, developing from the thermonuclear arsenals of the high Cold War, through the high-tech operational weaponry of the ‘revolution in military affairs’ and on to global terrorism. Yet so much of the world, even as we know it today, can be traced back to the Second World War.

In his introduction to the 2014 *Cambridge History of the First World War*, Jay Winter discussed the development of war historiography in generational terms and identified a new (fourth) generation of historians working on the 1914–18 conflict, whom he referred to as the ‘transnational generation’. They differed from their predecessors, he argued, in their global outlook, which he contrasted with an older ‘international’ approach.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to accept that history has never been written on a comparative basis before, or that historians have not thought about levels of historical experience below and above the national level. However, it is certainly right to urge that historians should aspire to this, within the limitations of language skills and access to archives. It is better not to become too fascinated with historical fashion. The ‘new military history’, the ‘new social history’, the ‘new cultural history’, the ‘new international history’ – even ‘contemporary history’ – are none of them all that ‘new’ or ‘contemporary’ any more. With the passage of time, their definition becomes looser and looser.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (3 vols., Cambridge University Press, 2014), vol. III, p. 6.

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[More information](#)

---

EVAN MAWDSLEY

Transnational history, moreover, has been aptly described as ‘the latest incarnation of an approach that has successively been characterized as comparative, international, world, and global history’,<sup>5</sup> and the *Cambridge History of the Second World War* is certainly all of these. I would share David Reynolds’s judgement that ‘the traditional agenda of international history – life-and-death governmental decisions for peace or war’ is and will remain of vital importance.<sup>6</sup> But making such decisions is only part of the story. What historians have to do, especially for a topic as broad, rich and challenging as the Second World War, is to combine every approach in the historical arsenal. This has been achieved by the contributors to the current Cambridge History.

5 ‘On Transnational History’, *American Historical Review* 101 (2006), 1441.

6 David Reynolds, ‘International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch’, *Cultural and Social History* 3 (2005), 75–91.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction to Volume I

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The three-volume *Cambridge History of the Second World War* (CHSWW) is not exclusively or even fundamentally a work of military history. However, Volume I is indeed about the ‘war-fighting’ or ‘operational’ aspects of that conflict, as opposed to the politics and diplomacy of the war, or its economic, social or cultural properties. The volume approaches nations, institutions and topics from a comparative and transnational perspective. It is subdivided into three related parts. Part I assesses the ‘grand strategies’ and ‘strategic cultures’ of the eight major states involved. It questions what those states attempted to do militarily during the war, how they expected to achieve those objectives, and how these matters related to national traditions and organizations. The second part of the volume discusses the fighting across the years of the Second World War, what might be called a ‘campaign narrative’, although the treatment is more analytical than that term suggests. Broadly speaking, this part assesses the war at both the strategic and ‘operational’ levels, which, of course, are related to grand strategic issues, and from comparative and competitive perspectives. Part III examines, thematically, the military institutions and instruments that featured in the war, from the planning of campaigns to the treatment of prisoners. Inevitably, the chapters, and the three parts, overlap, but repetition has been kept to a minimum.

The military events of the Second World War have been the subject of historical inquiry for six decades.<sup>1</sup> This body of work might be divided into three broad chronological phases: early, intermediate and recent. Each phase has been influenced in different ways by factors such as the availability

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed historiography of the topic, we suggest the excellent collection in Thomas W. Zeiler and Daniel M. DuBois (eds.), *A Companion to World War II* (2 vols., Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

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 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

JOHN FERRIS AND EVAN MAWDSLEY

of sources, personal perspectives and contemporary events, and by changing approaches to history.

The early phase – the ‘post-war’ period – took in the years from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. This older literature on the military history of the Second World War was conditioned by the immediate impact of experience (first-person accounts, memoirs), by nationalism, and by limited access – at least by ‘non-official’ historians – to the archives.

The governments of the victor powers, and various military institutions, produced official histories written by teams of specialists, many of whom had participated in the planning or fighting; some of these histories were published, others were secret and reserved for in-house use. They sought, among other things, to assess and defend their commanders, forces and strategies before national and international publics, and to accumulate information useful for future conflicts, not only from their own experience but from that of former enemies. Among the series intended for publication, the British official history was the most impressive, opening debates with power and sophistication, and incorporating – in a more or less standard layout – the military, diplomatic and economic aspects of state policy. The British ‘theatre of war’ histories told the story from the viewpoint of all three armed services, and attempted to combine operational and strategic issues, breadth and depth. The American and Dominion histories, conversely, focused on single services and offered great detail about narrow issues, about which they remain important today. Historians of the victorious countries had the benefit of captured enemy sources, including documents which had been physically transferred to London, Washington or Moscow. Some documents related to war planning and operations (as well as war crimes) became widely available through the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, but most remained closed to the public.

There was also, especially in the victor countries, but in Germany and Italy too, a flood of memoirs and unofficial histories of battles and campaigns intended for a broad public. In Western countries, this flood was driven by commercial publishing decisions, in the Soviet Union by the state, but in all cases the initiative reflected high levels of popular interest. These accounts were characterized by traditional approaches to military history, which focused on campaigns, commanders and weaponry, combined with descriptions of military genius and clashes of personality. This has been called the ‘traditional “drum and trumpet” or “good general–bad general” approach’.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Citino, ‘Military Histories Old and New: A Reintroduction’, *American Historical Review* 112 (2007), 1070.



Cambridge University Press

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Volume I: Fighting the War

Edited by John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction to Volume I*

Memoirs were of particular interest, as retired generals and admirals gathered in their masses to defend their records in victory and defeat; especially influential were the rise of personality cults around the commanders in Africa and southern and western Europe during 1942–45, and efforts by former German generals to lay the blame for defeat on Hitler's incompetence, to sidestep responsibility for the crimes of his regime, and to suggest that the Eastern Front was really the first campaign of the Cold War, where the Western Allies fought on the wrong side. Personality cults dominated and disfigured debates within the USSR. Over the first post-war decade, Joseph Stalin was given credit for the successes of the Red Army, and wartime victory served to legitimize Communist rule. After Stalin's death in 1953, he was blamed for the catastrophes of 1941–42. Soviet treatment of the war history evolved further in the period after the fall of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964; Stalin was more ignored than criticized, and Marshal Zhukov – sacked by Khrushchev in 1957 – was allowed to publish his memoirs. The Red Army increasingly used memoirs to bolster its position in the Soviet state.

These 'early' years were also those of the high Cold War. David Reynolds has written a splendid volume demonstrating the influence of the Cold War on Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*.<sup>3</sup> Churchill, unique in his freedom of access to the documents and ability to state his mind, set the agenda for future Western histories of the conflict. The Cold War affected the military history of the Second World War in several ways. On one side of the ideological divide were the United States, Britain and France (and from the late 1950s, their newly rearmed German, Italian and Japanese partners). On the other side were previous wartime allies in the form of the Russians and the Chinese, who soon fell out with one another. Each victor power tended to stress its own role, downplay that of its allies, and read the Cold War back into the events of 1939–45.

The Cold War also affected notions of warfare. By the middle 1950s, the advent of thermonuclear weapons meant that any great future war would be technically different from the Second World War. Mass armies, navies and air forces, and long-term industrial mobilization seemed decreasingly central to conflict, though until 1991 both sides maintained large conventional forces, shaped by the experiences of the Second World War, for purposes of power politics. Indeed, at this time, the original meaning of war-fighting came into use, which described a mutually destructive thermonuclear exchange as a

3 David Reynolds, *In Command of History* (London: Penguin, 2005).

Cambridge University Press

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Volume I: Fighting the War

Edited by John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

JOHN FERRIS AND EVAN MAWDSLEY

disastrous alternative to deterrence. At the same time, contemporary 'strategy' came to focus on *detering* war, rather than conducting it ('war-fighting').<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, again, more and more was written about 'people's war' and 'counter-insurgency'. Guerrillas or partisans had not been a leading feature of the Second World War (regular forces could contain them), but in the first decades after the war, Communist or Nationalist insurgents won victories in China, in former European colonies and in other parts of the newly conceptualized 'Third World'. These achievements made guerrillas seem more formidable than they later proved to be, once removed from the context of 'wars of national liberation'. Nonetheless, although the First and Second World Wars had been very different from previous conflicts, they now themselves seemed irrelevant from a contemporary military point of view. Between nuclear war and guerrilla war, the experience of large-scale 'conventional' war seemed a matter more of history and commemoration than of practical interest.

The intermediate phase includes the period from the late 1960s to the 1990s. The wartime leaders largely left the scene. Memories of the war, and to some extent even Nationalist passions, faded. Germany, Japan and Italy were full allies (albeit successful economic rivals) of the United States, Britain and France. Cold War tensions continued. The Soviet government continued to use memories of victory – history and myth – as a means of self-legitimization. It also used memories of liberation from Nazi Germany to garner support in the Eastern European satellites. Far more than in Western countries, officials who had held important wartime posts remained in the Kremlin gerontocracy until the 1980s. During this period, other conflicts engaged public attention, including that of historians. In particular, the war in Indochina tested the American military and the staying power of its population, and seemingly validated the Leninist concept of 'wars of national liberation'. The Communist government in China, however, took less interest in the military history of the war against Japan led by their old rival Chiang Kai-shek (who died in 1975), than in their own struggle against his forces.

New developments with evidence and analysis challenged the older literature, which had been Nationalist and operational in focus, and dominated by official writing, with little public access to primary documents. Large quantities of captured Axis records now entered the public domain. In some countries, accelerated public access to the official records produced new

4 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986 [1965]), p. 294; Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 36–42.