

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Review Essay

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**Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat: Good and Evil in World War II*.** New York: HarperCollins, 2011. Pp. xxi, 650. ISBN 978-0-06-058097-1.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Weinberg-Burleigh.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo Gerhard L. Weinberg, Professor of History Emeritus, University of North Carolina

This book is designed to survey major aspects of World War II from a moral rather than operational perspective. After briefly surveying the rise of the “Predators,” as Burleigh calls the countries that would join in the Tripartite pact, the author provides an account of the effort to appease them that is several decades out of date. He is so enamored of Winston Churchill that he has missed his advice to the Czechs in 1938 that if prime minister, he would follow the same policy as that being followed by Neville Chamberlain. Similarly, Burleigh has completely missed the by now well documented way in which the British and French changed their policy in the winter of 1938-39. A thoughtful review of the way in which Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin ruled their respective states emphasizes entirely sensibly their cults of personality as well as the nature of the massively corrupt political parties that provided their support.

The author provides a good account of the way in which the actual fighting in Poland with its massive atrocities took place, as well as the respective occupation policies of Germany and the Soviet Union, though as elsewhere, the text is marred by errors that could easily have been avoided. The fighting in the spring of 1940 is not described; instead there is a very poor account of the discussion about continuing the war in London. Nothing is included about the German plans for the occupation of the United Kingdom, and there is no serious review of Hitler’s decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941 as opposed to his original preference for doing so still in 1940. A good brief account of the Battle of Britain is unfortunately followed by nonsense about the destroyer for bases deal and Lord Halifax’s role as Ambassador to the United States.

Subsequent chapters review German policy and actions in occupied Europe with special emphasis on France, a subject dealt with at even greater length in a chapter on resistance that concentrates on that country. When he gets to the origins and beginnings of the war between Japan and the United States and Britain, the author demonstrates his general

unfamiliarity with those subjects as is also the case whenever the war in the Pacific is touched on in subsequent chapters.

Readers will be interested and enlightened by Burleigh's discussion of the SOE, while his review of Hitler's relations with his generals is based mainly on hopelessly unreliable memoirs the author previously downgraded. Brief sketches of a few British and Japanese commanders are followed by silly comments on General George C. Marshall's relations with President Roosevelt. A real strength of the book is a review in chapters 15-18 of what has come to be known as the Holocaust where the author covers the reality of killing, the role of the Jewish councils, the reactions to it all of the Allies, and the incidents of individual assistance and rescue by others at the time. Here as elsewhere in the book, Burleigh illustrates his account with specific examples that provide insight into the events. An excellent and fair review of the role of the Royal Air Force and the arguments over strategic bombing is unfortunately followed by an unconvincing chapter on the American air force which fails to relate that role to the need for control of the air for the D-Day landing.

A concluding chapter reviews the last stages of the war in Europe and the Pacific with accounts of the fate of the Italians, Germans, and Japanese, including the presence and absence of trials for prior crimes committed during the conflict. As a scholar from England who teaches there, Burleigh should have discovered that Japan was not occupied entirely by American soldiers: there was a British Commonwealth Occupation Force!

As a whole, the book offers both wise insights and the author's cryptic comments on those of whom he disapproves in society. The concept that both inspires and limits the book is surely one worthy of the attention the author has given it. What is especially refreshing about the text is the generally fair and balanced way that Burleigh deals with such controversial issues as the nature of resistance and collaboration, strategic bombing, the Jewish Councils, the Allied reactions to the Holocaust, and the postwar efforts to deal with a record of massive immoral acts.

**Gerhard L. Weinberg** is William Rand Keaton, Jr. Professor Emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of many works, including *Guide to Captured German Documents* (1952), a two-volume history of Hitler's diplomatic preparations for war: *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany* (1970 and 1980); and *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (1994). His most recent publications are *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler* (2003) and *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944* (2007). Weinberg received the 2009 Pritzker Military Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing.

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