

***Allies in War:
Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945***
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

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The Second World War has a habit of defeating historians. Paul Fussell's attempt at a sequel to *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) ends with a tacit admission of that painful experience, for which he offers a kind of lamentation-explanation:

The Great War brought forth the stark, depressing *Journey's End*; the Second, ... the tuneful *South Pacific*. The real war was tragic and ironic, beyond the power of any literary or philosophical analysis to suggest, but in unbombed America especially, the meaning of the war seemed inaccessible. ... America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like, and has thus been unable to use such understanding to re-interpret and re-define the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity. ... What time seems to have shown our later selves is that perhaps there was less coherent meaning in the events of wartime than we had hoped. Deprived of a satisfying final focus by both the enormity of the war and the unmanageable copiousness of its verbal and visual residue, all the revisitor of this imagery can do, turning now this way, now that, is to indicate a few components of the scene.¹

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More recently, Niall Ferguson's attempt at a sequel to his tightly plotted history of 1914-18, *The Pity of War* (1999), turned into *The War of the World* (2006) – a great title but an empty vessel – a book of parts, curiously disarticulated.² Niall Ferguson is not one to admit defeat, but it seems that the book he originally planned somehow escaped his grasp, mutating Frankenstein-fashion into a fifty-year “war of the world”, c.1903-53, less a global war than an agglomeration, and a factitious one at that. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Ferguson, too, was confounded by the enormity of the Second World War, and that the satisfying final focus eluded him, just as it eluded Paul Fussell.

Perhaps only Gerhard Weinberg in *A World at Arms* (first published in 1994) has succeeded in imposing his will on this gargantuan conflict, sufficient to craft a magisterial, integral

¹ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 268, 296.

² If this seems too dismissive, perhaps I can refer readers to my review of the book in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 30 June 2006.

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whole – a history that is unchallengeably global and unmistakably his – coherent and complete, so far as any single voice or volume can reach.³

Weinberg's is in every sense an epic work, running to some 1,200 pages. Mark Stoler squeezes the Anglo-American war against the Axis into hardly more than 200 pages. The first thing to be said about his account is that it is an amazing feat of compression. It is sliced differently to its predecessors. According to custom (and culture), this unwieldy war is disaggregated into "the war in the west" and "the war in the east", the war against Germany and the war against Japan. *Allies in War*, by contrast, is global but sectoral. It embraces Anglo-American strategy and diplomacy in both theatres, leaving the Nazi-Soviet war to a separate volume in the same series.⁴ It might grudgingly be said that it treats only part of the whole. To this, the appropriate response is a Churchillian one – some whole! some part!

In fact it is not so much a compression as a distillation: a distillation of the current state of the art in Second World War studies, and in particular a distillation of Mark Stoler's own investigation of the subject over the last thirty years or more, beginning with his path-breaking work on the politics of the Second Front and culminating in a deeply-pondered and justly-celebrated study of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁵ *Allies in War* is built on this. It is a little like a semi-official history, in the best sense, authoritative, equable, international: at the same time panoramic and well-grounded. Stoler is sure-footed and skilful in gauging the level of detail required to make sense of the story and also keep it moving; judicious, in places perhaps a little cautious, in his assessment of men and measures; yet unambiguous in his insistence on some fundamental truths – that victory was not inevitable, certainly not to those who were doing the fighting; that chance and contingency played their part, just as Clausewitz had taught; that for three long years, 1941-44, the application of the Anglo-American war effort was as nothing compared to the Soviet, an inconvenient truth somehow suppressed in Anglo-American cultural consciousness until very recently.

It is in the first instance a kind of grand strategy of the war as fought by Britain and America, rather than a study of Anglo-American relations. In this it seems to me to be remarkably successful. Inevitably, with such a brisk and business-like account, it is tempting to ask for more – more coverage or more colour – but rarely more clarity or more coherence. The naval and air wars are not as well integrated into the big story as they might be, while the concluding remarks on the strategic bombing campaign may strike some readers as either too sweeping or too equivocal (and also cause some muttering in the ranks of grammatical puritans):

³ Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* revised edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴ Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945* (London: Arnold, 2005).

⁵ Mark A. Stoler, *The Politics of the Second Front* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977); *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, The Grand Alliance and US Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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By the standards airpower theorists had themselves established before the war, the campaign was a failure. It did not result in a brief war, lower overall casualties, break enemy morale, destroy the enemy economy, or make irrelevant massive ground forces. It did help those ground forces enormously, however, and it played a major, perhaps a decisive role in their eventual victory. Whether that was worth the cost in lives lost and moral opprobrium incurred remains an open question (116).

My own sense of loss – or greed for more – centres on “the special relationship” itself. *Allies in War* is packaged and framed and titled in such a way as to lead one to expect a heavy emphasis on the dynamics of the Anglo-American affair, a relationship or set of relationships which has of course been the subject of endless interpretation down the decades, starting with the evangelist-in-chief of the English-speaking peoples, Winston Churchill himself – and indeed this book is touted as challenging “the standard Churchillian view” of the alliance in action. And yet, there is rather little analysis of the special relationship as such. A good deal of the strategic and diplomatic narrative is naturally (and persuasively) taken up with Anglo-American debates and disagreements. But the way the relationship actually worked is not much explored. The susurrus of specialness, the deeply personal business of a relationship that was at once institutionalized and personalized – in a word, the informal alliance – all that is almost a missing dimension. Churchill and Roosevelt “truly established their close personal relationship” at the ARCADIA conference in the wake of Pearl Harbor, says Stoler (37), but neither the trueness nor the closeness is substantiated here. The intimate friendship between Field Marshal Sir John Dill and General George C. Marshall is very properly underlined (51), but not explained. A brief summation has a nice line in “commonalities and personalities” (229) – and perceived need – but this is too late: these threads are not woven into the fabric of the work. Characterization, especially, is not the author’s strong suit. Together with constraints of space, the result is that the leading actors are long on strategic calculation, but short on flesh and blood. Likewise the special relationship. It was special, he concludes, and is still. A bridge too far?

However that may be, as a history of the Anglo-Americans against the Axis, *Allies in War* is a small miracle of achievement, possibly the most convincing encapsulation of that ticklish subject yet written. A generation of students will stand in his debt. So do we all. Hail Mark Stoler, the undefeated!

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