

World War Two Was Not a Just War

By David Swanson

Excerpted from the just released book [War Is Never Just](#).

World War II is often called “the good war,” and has been since the U.S. war on Vietnam to which it was then contrasted. World War II so dominates U.S. and therefore Western entertainment and education, that “good” often comes to mean something more than “just.” The winner of the “Miss Italy” beauty pageant earlier this year got herself into a bit of a scandal by declaring that she would have liked to live through World War II. While she was mocked, she was clearly not alone. Many would like to be part of something widely depicted as noble, heroic, and exciting. Should they actually find a time machine, I recommend they read the statements of some actual WWII veterans and survivors before they head back to join the fun.^[i] For purposes of this book, however, I am going to look only at the claim that WWII was morally just.

No matter how many years one writes books, does interviews, publishes columns, and speaks at events, it remains virtually impossible to make it out the door of an event in the United States at which you’ve advocated abolishing war without somebody hitting you with the what-about-the-good-war question. This belief that there was a good war 75 years ago is a large part of what moves the U.S. public to tolerate dumping a trillion dollars a year into preparing in case there’s a good war next year,^[ii] even in the face of so many dozens of wars during the past 70 years on which there’s general consensus that they were not good. Without rich, well-established myths about World War II, current propaganda about Russia or Syria or Iraq or China would sound as crazy to most people as it sounds to me. And of course the funding generated by the Good War legend leads to more bad wars, rather than preventing them. I’ve written on this topic at great length in many articles and books, especially *War Is A Lie*.^[iii] But I’ll offer here a few key points that ought to at least place a few seeds of doubt in the minds of most U.S. supporters of WWII as a Just War.

Mark Allman and Tobias Winright, the “Just War” authors discussed in previous chapters, are not very forthcoming with their list of Just Wars, but they do mention in passing numerous unjust elements of the U.S. role in WWII, including U.S. and U.K. efforts to wipe out the populations of German cities^[iv] and the insistence on unconditional surrenders.^[v] However, they also suggest that they may believe this war was justly engaged in, unjustly conducted, and justly followed through on via the Marshall Plan, etc.^[vi] I’m not sure Germany’s role as host of U.S. troops,

weapons, and communications stations, and as collaborator in unjust U.S. wars over the years is included in the calculation.

Here are what I think of as the top 12 reasons the Good War wasn't good/just.

1. World War II could not have happened without World War I, without the stupid manner of starting World War I and the even stupider manner of ending World War I which led numerous wise people to predict World War II on the spot, or without Wall Street's funding of Nazi Germany for decades (as preferable to communists), or without the arms race and numerous bad decisions that do not need to be repeated in the future.
1. The U.S. government was not hit with a surprise attack. President Franklin Roosevelt had quietly promised Churchill that the United States would work hard to provoke Japan into staging an attack. FDR knew the attack was coming, and initially drafted a declaration of war against both Germany and Japan on the evening of Pearl Harbor. Prior to Pearl Harbor, FDR had built up bases in the U.S. and multiple oceans, traded weapons to the Brits for bases, started the draft, created a list of every Japanese American person in the country, provided planes, trainers, and pilots to China, imposed harsh sanctions on Japan, and advised the U.S. military that a war with Japan was beginning. He told his top advisers he expected an attack on December 1st, which was six days off. Here's an entry in Secretary of War Henry Stimson's diary following a November 25, 1941, White House meeting: "The President said the Japanese were notorious for making an attack without warning and stated that we might be attacked, say next Monday, for example."
1. The war was not humanitarian and was not even marketed as such until after it was over. There was no poster asking you to help Uncle Sam save the Jews. A ship of Jewish refugees from Germany was chased away from Miami by the Coast Guard. The U.S. and other nations refused to accept Jewish refugees, and the majority of the U.S. public supported that position. Peace groups that questioned Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his foreign secretary about shipping Jews out of Germany to save them were told that, while Hitler might very well agree to the plan, it would be too much trouble and require too many ships. The U.S. engaged in no diplomatic or military effort to save the victims in the Nazi concentration camps. Anne Frank was denied a U.S. visa. Although this point has nothing to do with a serious historian's case for WWII as a Just War, it is so central to U.S. mythology that I'll include here a key passage from Nicholson Baker:

"Anthony Eden, Britain's foreign secretary, who'd been tasked by Churchill with handling queries about refugees, dealt coldly with one of many important delegations, saying that any

diplomatic effort to obtain the release of the Jews from Hitler was 'fantastically impossible.' On a trip to the United States, Eden candidly told Cordell Hull, the secretary of state, that the real difficulty with asking Hitler for the Jews was that 'Hitler might well take us up on any such offer, and there simply are not enough ships and means of transportation in the world to handle them.' Churchill agreed. 'Even were we to obtain permission to withdraw all the Jews,' he wrote in reply to one pleading letter, 'transport alone presents a problem which will be difficult of solution.' Not enough shipping and transport? Two years earlier, the British had evacuated nearly 340,000 men from the beaches of Dunkirk in just nine days. The U.S. Air Force had many thousands of new planes. During even a brief armistice, the Allies could have airlifted and transported refugees in very large numbers out of the German sphere." [\[vii\]](#)

Perhaps it does go to the question of "Right Intention" that the "good" side of the war simply did not give a damn about what would become the central example of the badness of the "bad" side of the war.

1. The war was not defensive. FDR lied that he had a map of Nazi plans to carve up South America, that he had a Nazi plan to eliminate religion, that U.S. ships (covertly assisting British war planes) were innocently attacked by Nazis, that Germany was a threat to the United States. [\[viii\]](#) A case can be made that the U.S. needed to enter the war in Europe to defend other nations, which had entered to defend yet other nations, but a case could also be made that the U.S. escalated the targeting of civilians, extended the war, and inflicted more damage than might have occurred, had the U.S. done nothing, attempted diplomacy, or invested in nonviolence. To claim that a Nazi empire could have grown to someday include an occupation of the United States is wildly far fetched and not borne out by any earlier or later examples from other wars.
1. We now know much more widely and with much more data that nonviolent resistance to occupation and injustice is more likely to succeed—and that success more likely to last—than violent resistance. With this knowledge, we can look back at the stunning successes of nonviolent actions against the Nazis that were not well organized or built on beyond their initial successes. [\[ix\]](#)
1. The Good War was not good for the troops. Lacking intense modern training and psychological conditioning to prepare soldiers to engage in the unnatural act of murder, some 80 percent of U.S. and other troops in World War II did not fire their weapons at "the enemy." [\[x\]](#) The fact that veterans of WWII were treated better after the war than other soldiers before or since, was the result of the pressure created by the Bonus Army after the previous war. That veterans were given free college, healthcare, and pensions was not due to the

merits of the war or in some way a result of the war. Without the war, everyone could have been given free college for many years. If we provided free college to everyone today, it would then require much more than Hollywoodized World War II stories to get many people into military recruiting stations.

1. Several times the number of people killed in German camps were killed outside of them in the war. The majority of those people were civilians. The scale of the killing, wounding, and destroying made WWII the single worst thing humanity has ever done to itself in a short space of time. We imagine the allies were somehow “opposed” to the far lesser killing in the camps. But that can’t justify the cure that was worse than the disease.
1. Escalating the war to include the all-out destruction of civilians and cities, culminating in the completely indefensible nuking of cities took WWII out of the realm of defensible projects for many who had defended its initiation—and rightly so. Demanding unconditional surrender and seeking to maximize death and suffering did immense damage and left a grim and foreboding legacy.
1. Killing huge numbers of people is supposedly defensible for the “good” side in a war, but not for the “bad” side. The distinction between the two is never as stark as fantasized. The United States had a long history as an apartheid state. U.S. traditions of oppressing African Americans, practicing genocide against Native Americans, and now interning Japanese Americans also gave rise to specific programs that inspired Germany’s Nazis—these included camps for Native Americans, and programs of eugenics and human experimentation that existed before, during, and after the war. One of these programs included giving syphilis to people in Guatemala at the same time the Nuremberg trials were taking place.^[xi] The U.S. military hired hundreds of top Nazis at the end of the war; they fit right in.^[xii] The U.S. aimed for a wider world empire, before the war, during it, and ever since. German neo-Nazis today, forbidden to wave the Nazi flag, sometimes wave the flag of the Confederate States of America instead.
1. The “good” side of the “good war,” the party that did most of the killing and dying for the winning side, was the communist Soviet Union. That doesn’t make the war a triumph for communism, but it does tarnish Washington’s and Hollywood’s tales of triumph for “democracy.”^[xiii]
1. World War II still hasn’t ended. Ordinary people in the United States didn’t have their incomes taxed until World War II and that’s never stopped. It was supposed to be temporary.^[xiv] WWII-era bases built around the world have

never closed. U.S. troops have never left Germany or Japan.^[xv] There are more than 100,000 U.S. and British bombs still in the ground in Germany, still killing.^[xvi]

1. Going back 75 years to a nuclear-free, colonial world of completely different structures, laws, and habits to justify what has been the greatest expense of the United States in each of the years since is a bizarre feat of self-deception that isn't attempted in the justification of any lesser enterprise. Assume I've got numbers 1 through 11 totally wrong, and you've still got to explain how an event from the early 1940s justifies dumping a trillion 2017 dollars into war funding that could have been spent to feed, clothe, cure, and shelter millions of people, and to environmentally protect the earth.

NOTES

^[i] Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (The New Press: 1997).

^[ii] Chris Hellman, *TomDispatch*, "\$1.2 Trillion for National Security," March 1, 2011, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175361>

^[iii] David Swanson, *War Is A Lie*, Second Edition (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2016).

^[iv] Mark J. Allman & Tobias L. Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010) p. 46.

^[v] Mark J. Allman & Tobias L. Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010) p. 14.

^[vi] Mark J. Allman & Tobias L. Winright, *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010) p. 97.

^[vii] *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar and Peace Writing*, edited by Lawrence Rosendwald.

^[viii] David Swanson, *War Is A Lie*, Second Edition (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2016).

^[ix] Book and Film: *A Force More Powerful*, <http://aforcemorepowerful.org>

^[x] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Back Bay Books: 1996).

<https://worldbeyondwar.org/world-war-two-not-just-war/>

[xi] Donald G. McNeil Jr., *The New York Times*, "U.S. Apologizes for Syphilis Tests in Guatemala," October 1, 2010,
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/health/research/02infect.html>

[xii] Annie Jacobsen, *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program that Brought Nazi Scientists to America* (Little, Brown and Company, 2014).

[xiii] Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, *The Untold History of the United States* (Gallery Books, 2013).

[xiv] Steven A. Bank, Kirk J. Stark, and Joseph J. Thorndike, *War and Taxes* (Urban Institute Press, 2008).

[xv] *RootsAction.org*, "Move Away from Nonstop War. Close the Ramstein Air Base,"
http://act.rootsaction.org/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=12254

[xvi] David Swanson, "The United States Just Bombed Germany,"
<http://davidswanson.org/node/5134>