

History 300: World War II

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Our contemporary world lives with the achievements, failures and myriad scars of World War II. The evidence abounds on map lines and memories, through general prosperity and liberty in people of many countries, gross poverty and deprivation for many others. A long line of people who served and sacrificed—most now gone from the WWII generation—runs parallel to another line of failed promise and experiment, often with immense human costs.

Yet, we of modern time have, to a large degree, forgotten. We suffer a cultural amnesia—often reflected in each of us—not fully aware of our debt and identity. We have to a great extent lost the memory of those ideas, events and people of the War that formed our modern way of living. To reclaim the outlines, the causes and effects, the continuing stories, as held within our own personal lives each day, to learn the background of modern times so as to judge with prudence the challenges of today and, thereby be decent, mature citizens of a free country, THAT constitutes the purpose and aim of this elective history course.

In one semester we can hope to, at the least, rekindle personal interest and memory, as well as grasp how those actions of yesterday form the basis of the present in which we live.

COURSE BOOKS: we will NOT be utilizing a textbook; rather several books that focus on particular events and people will be distributed. The initial books are, “D-Day: The Climactic Battle of World War II,” by Stephen F. Ambrose (author, as well, of “Band of Brothers,” among others); “Escape from Davao: The forgotten story of the most daring prison break of the Pacific War,” by John D. Lukacs. “Freedom’s Forge,” by Arthur Herman, a book about how a young immigrant who worked in a Danish bike shop when 16 years old, and other American business leaders , harassed the production power of what would be called the “arsenal of democracy.”

OUTLINE OF TOPICS: Covered primarily in class lectures, discussions and individual assignments. The main combatant nations and their social/ political/geographic characteristics; the clash of ideas; clash of interests,;

THE FEATURES OF WAR: how geography, technology and self-image lay the groundwork of conflicts; “the day before,” namely, the situation of the various countries in the 1930s that led to alliances and adversaries; the “tyranny” and “blessing” of distances, demography, topography, weather, and fateful assumptions about those facts that led to success or failures, e.g., Pearl Harbor/Midway, the Operation Barbarossa, radar, aerial innovations, etc; the fateful decisions of leaders on policy and strategy; the critical “fog of war” errors and accidents, the main battles, the generals and the privates; the allied leaders’ decisions that drew the lines of the post-war world further conflicts, as well as progress. {Think, if you will, of how many of the above factors formed aspects of your next Crescite trips!]

Finally: the world of ideologues and pirates vs. the system of nation-states in peaceful mutual recognition. The “Hang-Over” lessons for our time: a review of the opportunities and conflicts of interests we see in current events, and the continuous impact of geography and culture; the central consequences of prevalent, formative ideas and beliefs.

Assignments and grades: we will have a midterm exam and final exam based on topics of class lectures and discussions, as well as test Study Outlines I will distribute along the way. Class comportment and discussion with mutual respect are essential. FLASH FLASH: you DEFINITELY will need to learn to take notes in class. LOTS! Your notebooks will be perused by the teacher at random every two weeks for the purpose of giving advice as well as assigning grades.

ONE LAST NOTE: we will use extensively in class GOOGLE EARTH to show the importance of Geo-Strategy, a main classroom topic.

(YOU WANT A PRE-CLASS MIND-GAME? HOW in the heck do you succeed in landing 150,000+ soldiers (half of whom are 19 years-old and never saw any combat or dead bodies before that moment) with heavy battlefield equipment on a heavily-defended, hostile beachfront, after bringing them over 20-100 miles of troubled waters in 24 hours, using 5,000 ships, and do it all by surprising the very adept and powerful defending enemy who has had 4 years to plan your total destruction on that same beachfront? And do so without the whole first wave of soldiers being blown to pieces in insane chaos with ear-piercing explosions leverywhere like depicted in the vivid first-scenes of “Saving PrivateRyan”. And, for that matter, do you think that was actually realistic?