

# H-Net Reviews

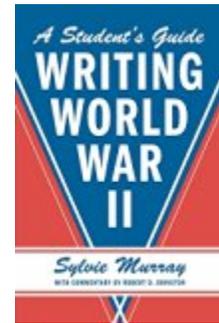
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sylvie Murray. *Writing World War II: A Student's Guide*. Commentary by Robert D. Johnston. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. 208 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-8549-1.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



## A Guided Missive for a Target Audience

Any historian who has ever faced yet another stack of student papers knows all too well that feeling of resignation as he or she peruses a number of simple, one-sided arguments—all Americans wanted freedom in 1776, every woman fought to get the vote before 1920, everyone did “his part” to win World War II. Instructors with such experiences will feel kinship with Sylvie Murray (professor of American history, University of Fraser Valley, British Columbia), when she complains in the introduction to her essays in this book that students too often neglect “the basic principles of historical writing,” and rely too frequently on glib summaries and sweeping conclusions based on limited reading (p. ix). For this reason, Murray has produced *Writing World War II*.

This is a somewhat unusual book. The heart of it is nine essays by Murray, on various aspects of the American effort in World War II. But there is also a second level of remarks, consisting of brief commentaries by a second historian, Robert D. Johnston, explaining what he does and does not like about Murray’s interpretations. The promotional squib on the back cover of the book, and an additional flyer inserted by Hill and Wang, refers to Johnston’s comments as a design for “demystifying [Murray’s] techniques while helping you [the student] become more critical of all sorts of historical writing—including your own.” *Writing World War II* offers the students, as the publisher’s promotional flyer states, a way of learning through “Murray’s own writing as a model for constructing a persuasive essay.” This is an unusual approach, and I think it will succeed with students only

up to a point.

Murray’s stated purpose for her essays is to outline for students a much richer, more textured view of this biggest of all American wars. By doing so, she hopes to open their eyes to the more heterogeneous challenges confronting anyone who wants to write meaningfully about such a major, complex historical event. Murray’s essays are very good, well argued, and cleverly laid out to harmonize her major points. In one essay, she underscores the complex maneuvers and the pragmatic motives of Franklin Roosevelt as he steadily and stealthily nudged his nation toward greater support for the Allies. In another essay, she chides text publishers for relying too much on “stereotypes and misrepresentations” in portraying the war years, and especially for casting the “isolationists” (a term she rejects as misleading) as being naïve and unfair (p. 20). In a blistering essay, she takes to task popular writers, like Tom Brokaw and Stephen Ambrose, for championing “the paradigm of the Good War.” In what is perhaps her best essay, “Gendered Patriots,” she points out that only a slim minority of women worked in actual war industry jobs, and paints a variegated and nicely balanced picture of the many roles American women played in the war. Yet another essay examines letters that soldiers wrote home to highlight their mixed desires and the frustrations while in the armed services. The remaining essays that round out the collection concern the limits of tolerance, patriotism, and wartime propaganda.

Murray's essays, aimed at her target audience of students studying the war era, are well documented with sources that should guide careful readers toward more sophisticated research and historical analysis in connection with this one, admittedly very large, subject. While the book adds little new to what other historians have already presented in larger, more detailed works—most notably, John Morton Blum's *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (1976); the much-respected *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (1987) by Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black; and David M. Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999)—Murray's clear and simple summaries should work well with undergraduates. Taken together with the numerous other works that Murray provides in her notes, *Writing World War II* challenges students to look beyond the "good war" image of so many books and examine the conflict more deeply.

Inasmuch as this is the book's purpose, it succeeds. But the book also has a serious limitation. As *A Student's Guide*, it lacks direct and pointed advice for good writing. Murray's essays contain no specific advice to students on how to write about the war years, how to assemble their research, or how to argue and support their views. Johnston's remarks, which were added, the publishers imply, to provide such guidance, are also limited. The closest Johnston comes to giving specific advice to the reader is in his comments on Murray's criticism of Robert Westbrook's *Why We Fought: Forging American Obligations in World War II* (2004). Noting that he is "a bit disappointed"

in her summary, Johnston states that he would have liked more analysis (p. 89). But Johnston provides no real advice of his own, and for the most part he is content to add a muted kind of "me too" to Murray's general themes.

Many of those who have endeavored to teach history students the techniques of writing a good paper know well the challenges: overall writing and reading abilities have steadily declined in past decades. Most students, especially those in high school and early years of college, now need *specific guideposts* to aid them when writing. But this book does not really follow through on what its title implies. I suspect that many students who try to use this book without help will find this double layer of statements by Murray and Johnston confusing. Instead of finding detailed advice for assembling and analyzing information and interpretations about the war, students are largely left to extract the lessons themselves. Since this *Guide* faces tough competition in a market that is already well stocked with handbooks for writing history, this is a real weakness. For that reason, this book will be most valuable when an experienced instructor uses it while helping students in writing papers.

Hill and Wang should consider targeting teachers for this publication, perhaps with other WWII-related works in its catalog. Scholars engaged in research on the war years would profit from looking at Murray's essays, and those who teach classes on the Second World War would find the work helpful, particularly as they assign papers on the subject. But in the hands of unassisted students, it may well miss the mark

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