

H-Net Reviews

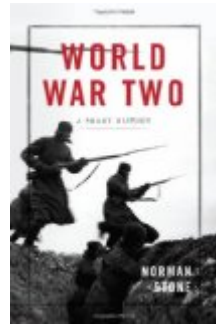
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Norman Stone. *World War Two: A Short History*. New York: Basic Books, 2012. xxvi + 238 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-01372-2.

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Published on H-War (August, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Norman Stone's new volume, *World War II: A Short History*, offers a fresh synthesis of humanity's most violent struggle. The author has a personal stake in recounting the war, as his father, a RAF pilot, was killed during World War II when Stone was an infant. Stone's background as a British historian of Russia and Eastern Europe gives him the sort of broad perspective necessary to cover such a tremendous amount of ground. His work also aims to incorporate new scholarship into his condensed narrative, such as Adam Tooze's *The Wages of Destruction* (2008) and David Glantz's operational studies of the Red Army.

The book's nine chapters are organized at first chronologically until late 1942, when he proceeds with a mixture of thematic and chronological elements until the end of the war. The greatest strength of this book is Stone's delightful writing style; he fills his work with pithy and memorable phrases. In describing the U.S. air war against Japan, for instance: "A biblical fate awaited Japan, once the Americans could establish a proper base for the delivery of fire and brimstone" (p. 160). It is hard not to be engaged with his lively writing style. It makes for brisk reading, particularly in the introduction.

Stone also sprinkles his work with literary references that add panache without being pompous, a relatively rare feat in military histories. When describing Hitler's last-minute marriage to Eva Braun, he notes that "Hitler was not a very good Siegfried, and Eva Braun was no Brunnhilde.... The Third Reich thus ended with a sort of shot-gun wedding and then a mismanaged cremation" (pp. 177). His literary sensibility adds structure and character to his condensed narrative, avoiding the lifelessness characteristic of many short histories of the war.

Besides his writing, Stone provides a number of services to the history of the war in this volume. British historians of the war have long neglected the eastern front when attempting this sort of work; Stone avoids this pitfall. His descriptions of the eastern front are excellent and often incorporate very recent scholarship. Historians of Eastern Europe will be satisfied by Stone's treatment of Russia, Poland, and southeastern Europe. In addition, he provides analyses that will at some times surprise even the best-read students of World War II. His framing of the first forty-one weeks of World War II as the last European war, or his discussion of Soviet-Western European economic relations will intrigue historians and scholars familiar with the field.

Despite its many virtues, there are a number of problems—some serious—with this volume. A work of this brevity will inevitably have to leave some areas of the war out, to the annoyance of many specialists. However, some balance must be preserved for the narrative to make sense and this the author patently fails to do. He focuses his efforts largely on the British and Soviet struggles against Germany to the neglect of all else.

This is particularly evident away from Europe. It is comically clear that the author considers the entire Pacific War a sideshow: the theater is covered by less than 8 percent of the book's pages. China is barely mentioned. Tarawa and Saipan merit a sentence each; the descriptions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa share a single sentence. Weighed against this, he devotes eight pages to the British campaign in North Africa. Bernard Montgomery features prominently throughout the book and is portrayed as the hero of the Normandy invasion. Less significant British commanders, such as Richard O'Connor,

Claude Auchinleck, and Andrew Cunningham, receive attention while Dwight Eisenhower is mentioned only three times in the entire work. When the author decides to further minimize the single bloodiest battle for the United States during World War II—the Battle of the Bulge—with three dismissive sentences (“too much was made of this [battle]”) one begins to suspect the author forgot that the United States was a major participant in the war (p. 178).

Norman Stone has produced a book from the perspec-

tives of London, Berlin and Moscow. It will engage anyone interested in those portions of the war. If he had added “European Theater” somewhere in the title and dropped any pretense of covering the Far East, this volume would be much better. However, this fault means that it cannot serve as an introduction to the war for an uninitiated undergraduate or a general reader. Despite this, as an intelligent—though partial—commentary on World War II, scholars and specialists will find it worth their time.

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Citation: Ian Johnson. Review of Stone, Norman, *World War Two: A Short History*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. August, 2013.

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