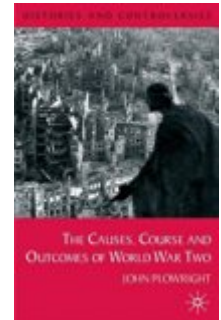


John Plowright. *The Causes, Course, and Outcomes of World War Two.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xv + 230 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-333-79345-9.



Reviewed by Thomas Josephson

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In this book, John Plowright succinctly describes the events leading up to World War II, the course of the war, and the lasting effects of the war, particularly on Great Britain and the United States. The book is a collection of stand-alone essays on what Plowright believes to be the most important topics of World War II. The book serves as a general review of the major literature in English on World War II for non-experts, but Plowright does draw interesting conclusions in certain controversial areas, particularly regarding the potential criminality of Allied bombing in Germany.

Plowright begins by describing the factors that contributed to the outbreak of war in 1939. As with other historians of World War II, Plowright points to factors such as the Versailles Treaty and the policy of appeasement as the major causes of the war. He also addresses the role of Hitler and the development of Nazi foreign policy. He points to Germany's dismay with the Versailles Treaty as one of the major contributing factors behind Hitler's rise to power. Plowright describes how unrealistic expectations about reparations

led to the collapse of the German economy in the 1920s and notes growing contempt in the German population as a reason why the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations failed to prevent future German aggression. He also points to the popularity of the stab-in-the-back myth as one of many things the Nazis seized upon to gain public support and rise to power. Plowright provides a balanced and honest portrayal of Neville Chamberlain that acknowledges his shortcomings while fairly assessing the many poor decisions he made. In short, Plowright rightly demonstrates the problems with appeasement while revealing the aggressive and manipulative nature of Nazi foreign policy. After this point in his monograph, Plowright slips into mere description of the war and its aftermath.

The middle and bulk of the book cover mostly the European theater of the war, but Plowright also dedicates a chapter to the Pacific as well. He begins with the Fall of France. In this section, again drawing on conclusions made by other historians, he explains that several debates continue to surround the Fall of France, and recent re-

search suggests that, in addition to the long-known impact of the blitzkrieg and the ill-conceived Maginot Line, military, political, and social problems also contributed greatly to France's swift defeat in 1940. Plowright then moves on to the Battle of Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic. Drawing primarily on Richard Overly's *The Battle* (2000), Plowright argues that Britain did not necessarily face insurmountable odds in the Battle of Britain, nor did the British "stand alone" against Germany, since Britain drew support from the Commonwealth and received help from Czech and Polish squadrons (p. 56). Plowright then shifts to the most significant portion of the European war--the Eastern Front. Again, Plowright does little more than describe the battle, but he does provide some background on German-Russian relations prior to 1917 and Nazi-Soviet relations before the war. In particular he considers the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and different economic agreements between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. Plowright then provides brief, but descriptive, chapters on the Holocaust and the Pacific War. In only thirteen pages, Plowright covers all of the major events and arguments about the Holocaust, giving only particular attention to Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996). His chapter on the Pacific War is shorter still and obviously a mere appendage included in an attempt to account for the entire war in an otherwise Eurocentric monograph.

It is his chapter on the Allied bombing campaigns, however, that proves the most intriguing. Perhaps the best example of the evenhanded description of the war comes in Plowright's chapter on the Allied bombing campaigns. In contrast to other sections of his work, in this section, Plowright draws on newer works to show that, although in their basic nature the Allied bombing campaigns against civilian targets can be a considered a war crime, Allied leaders lacked the murderous intent that characterized the actions of Nazi leaders. Moreover, Plowright contends

that, to a great extent, Allied leaders simply responded to similar campaigns against their own populations, and once they realized the potential criminality of their actions (particularly after Dresden) they ratcheted back the intensity of civilian bombings. This is arguably the most controversial as well as the most interesting section in Plowright's book.

The final third of the book describes the war's lasting impact on Germany and the importance of the war in shaping Cold War politics. Plowright closes with a commentary on the war's effects on Britain and the United States, but these observations have long been present in the historiography and he presents nothing new to those familiar with postwar and Cold War Europe. He concludes with two brief chapters on the dismantling and disintegration of the British Empire and the rise of the United States in international politics.

Because the book pares down and restates arguments by other, more influential historians of World War II, it offers few, if any, original ideas for interpreting World War II and is best suited for a non-academic audience seeking to attain a cursory knowledge of World War II. More serious readers of World War II and German history will likely find the work frustrating, as it simply synthesizes well-known major works on World War II and neglects to utilize primary sources beyond brief tangential references to *Mein Kampf* (1925) and popular speeches by Churchill and other major World War II figures. Perhaps most problematic, especially for those unfamiliar with the course of World War II, is the book's structure. Plowright includes a short preface, an introduction, and a conclusion that barely unify a loosely-held-together monograph linked by an extremely general theme. The last portions of the book prove particularly frustrating for German historians because they give unequal weight to postwar Britain and America, and only superficially address postwar and Cold War Germany. Shortcomings aside, however, this book is a concise, easy-to-understand,

and well-written text perfect for those with little exposure to World War II.

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