

THE MEANING OF



By WILLIAMSON MURRAY

One cannot look across the long, seemingly endless rows of crosses and Stars of David that dot the cemeteries at Omaha Beach, St. James, and elsewhere in Europe and the Pacific without a sense of the terrible cost of victory in World War II. The cold stone memorials underscore the ages of those whose lives war cut short at eighteen, twenty, twenty-four, thirty years—men who never again saw their families and homes. And as each year passes fewer and fewer visitors come to these lonely corners of America.

As the past recedes from memory to words printed on a page, historians will start to depict victory in that terrible conflict in soft, ill-measured words. They will suggest that our efforts were nothing more than the reverse side of a coin—that in fact there was little moral worth to the Allied cause, that for every German or Japanese war crime

there were similar American or British crimes (a Hamburg, Berlin, or Dresden), the refusal to bomb the rail lines to Auschwitz, the starvation of German POWs at the war's end, or Hiroshima—undoubtedly this summer we will hear ceaseless comments about dropping the atomic bomb on Japan as a “crime against humanity.”

These purveyors of moral equivalence are wrong. It is well that we realize, in considering its human cost, why the war was fought and why there is a moral dimension to the Allied victory. Perhaps nothing delineates the character of World War II better than the ambitions and actions of our opponents. Adolf Hitler aimed, in the words of one historian, at nothing short of “a biological world revolution”—the conquest of Europe and beyond, the enslavement of Slavs,



Intersection in Tokyo
(Japan, 1946) by Hans
Mangelndorf.

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the elimination of all differently abled, the extermination of European and possibly world Jewry, and the creation of a great Aryan empire that would rule from Gibraltar

to the Urals and last “a thousand years.”¹ Japanese objectives were perhaps less coherent, but propaganda about a “Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” suggests a dramatic plan to restructure Asia—including the enslavement of much of China, an effort that if not equal to the viciousness of Hitler’s “New Order” certainly did result in extraordinary crimes against humanity.

Thus, behind the murderous execution of operational campaigns came ideological and racial baggage in both the European and

Pacific theaters that made the war phenomenal even in the long, violent history of the human race. German attacks on Warsaw, Rotterdam, London, and Belgrade were out-and-out attempts to intimidate opponents into surrendering through the wholesale murder of civilians by airpower; and the *Luftwaffe* was highly successful, killing 17,000 Serbs in a single day.² In the late 1930s the Japanese lacked the capabilities for strategic bombing, but the “Rape of Nanking” illustrates Tokyo’s contempt for international law and the treatment of civilians at the outset of what eventually turned into its war against every ethnic group in Asia.

Moreover, from the outset German forces displayed a callousness toward both civilians and prisoners of war that represented a sharp break with the practices of World War I. The killing of over a hundred British POWs at Le Paradis in May 1940 was the first in a series of incidents involving the *Waffen SS*.³ The execution of Canadians by the murderous juvenile delinquents of the 12th SS Panzer Division, *Hitler Jugend*,⁴ the

slaughter of French civilians at Oradour-sur-Glan by troops of the 2nd SS Panzer Division, *Das Reich*,⁵ and the slaying of Americans at Malmedy by Peiper’s SS troops in late 1944⁶ typified behavior among Hitler’s ideological legions in the west. The east was another matter. As *Waffen SS* soldiers told the interviewer Max Hastings, Oradour-sur-Glan was small potatoes compared to what had happened in the east.

But the largest military crime—one that makes other incidents pale into insignificance—was the treatment of Soviet POWs by the *Wehrmacht*, not the SS. By the end of the 1941 campaign, the Germans claimed to have captured over 3.6 million Soviets in the great encirclement battles of Operation Barbarossa.⁷ What ensued was a calculated policy of starvation and murder, of which the infamous commissar order represented only the tip of the iceberg.⁸

Field Marshal Keitel received a memo in March 1942 indicating that of the approximately 3.6 million POWs captured in operations against the Soviet Union barely

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German Prisoners
(Paris, 1944)
by Floyd Davis.

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a hundred thousand were fit to work. The vast majority had already perished from starvation, exposure, or disease.⁹ By 1945 only a hundred thousand of the Soviets captured in 1941 had survived the maltreatment inflicted on them in work camps. Throughout the war, particularly in the 1941 campaign, the German army was delighted to undertake “special action” (*Sonderbehandlungen*) against East European Jews.¹⁰ Beyond the villainy of the military lay the ferocious crimes of the Nazi regime that resulted in the extermination of 6 million Jews solely on the basis of their race, the murder of 3 million Poles, and the death of more than 25 million Soviet citizens—a record unequalled even by Stalin and Mao.

Japanese crimes in the Pacific never reached the levels of German atrocities, though not for lack of trying. The “Rape of Nanking” set the standard for the Imperial Army’s conduct in China. Throughout the war the Japanese carried out extensive experiments in biological warfare, including live vivisections and dropping bubonic agents on Chinese villages.¹¹ One suspects, given the lack of control which Tokyo exercised, that the military would have unleashed terrible

plagues in China if it had developed the capabilities.¹² What Japan did inflict more generally on occupied Korea and China has yet to be fully examined by historians.

Thus, there was a moral as well as a strategic dimension to the war that the Allies waged in Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, only Churchill among the leaders of Western democracies had recognized in the 1930s that Nazi Germany represented a strategic as well as a moral threat to the survival of democratic values and regimes. But conventional wisdom had considered his views old fashioned and no longer relevant in a world where intelligent people recognized that war was no longer an instrument of statecraft. Even Churchill’s stirring words after the ruinous Munich agreement could not shake the government or citizens out of the complacent belief that surrendering Czechoslovakia “had achieved peace in our time.” The British continued a policy of appeasement for six months and refused to mobilize for the coming struggle. Because Europe was so far away American policymakers were even less willing to recognize the threat and support measures needed to prepare the Nation.



Navy Day (New York Harbor, 1945) by Julien Binford.

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Fortunately, geography and the enemy's stupidity permitted the Anglo-American powers to escape the full consequences of their folly. When France fell in 1940, Britain's position seemed hopeless. It was not. Churchill galvanized the will of a nation outraged by aggression.¹³ Fighter Command, under Air Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, provided that measure of effectiveness to keep Britain in the war and allow the United States more than a year to repair its considerable military deficiencies.

In 1941 the Germans turned a favorable situation against themselves. First they launched a great racial crusade against the Soviet Union, one that aimed not only at the extermination of Jews but the enslavement of Slavic peoples on Soviet territory.

Ironically, the ferocity and ruthlessness with which the Nazis waged ideological war drove the Soviet peoples to support Stalin's criminal regime which many of them would have been delighted to overthrow.

In the end Barbarossa also foundered on intelligence misestimates and logistic mistakes that still take one's breath away. An August 1941 quotation from the diary of General Franz Halder, chief of the general staff, suggests the extent of the Nazi intelligence failure:

The whole situation makes it increasingly plain that we have underestimated the Russian colossus, who consistently prepared for war with that utterly ruthless determination so characteristic of totalitarian states. . . . At the outset of the war, we reckoned with

*about 200 enemy divisions. Now we have counted 360. These divisions are not armed and equipped according to our standards, and their tactical leadership is often poor. But there they are, and if we smash a dozen of them, the Russians simply put up another dozen. The time factor favors them, as they are near their resources, while we are moving farther and farther from ours. And so our troops . . . are subject to the incessant attacks of the enemy.*¹⁴

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The logistic mistakes accumulated from the first step into Russia to wreck what little chance the Germans might have had to overthrow Stalin's regime in 1941. Quite simply, even as winter approached in November 1941 and every step in the advance on Moscow prevented the Germans from building up supply dumps to meet the trials of a Russian winter or even from moving winter clothes to the front, Halder could only idly hope that perhaps it would not snow until January.¹⁵

The evidence suggests that the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, followed shortly by Hitler's declaration of war on the United States, sealed the fate of the Axis. Certainly that was how Churchill saw the strategic situation in December 1941 before meeting with Roosevelt in Washington. But whatever economic and military advantages America, Britain, and the Soviet Union had over Germany, Japan, and Italy, victory could only come after great land, sea, and air campaigns with terrible casualties. Given the nature of the opposition, there was no other road.

Moreover, the defeat of the Axis required the use of force in a fashion that more squeamish times—when the fundamental *survival* of the West was less directly threatened—have found repugnant. The combined bomber offensive against Germany is perhaps the prime example; critics of that great Anglo-American effort have seized on its supposed immorality in killing and maiming hundreds of thousands of “innocent” Germans as well as its supposed lack

PBY Halt to Rest
(Norfolk, 1942)
by Paul Sample.



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All Aboard for Home
by Joseph Hirsch.



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of effect. In fact, that effort was not pretty; it did lead to the death of civilians. And it did not reach the over-optimistic goals which its advocates had intended.

But the bomber offensive was essential to winning the war in Europe: it broke the back of the *Luftwaffe*, and without that achievement it is doubtful whether Allied forces would have made a lodgement on the French coast.¹⁶ It wrecked the transport system, a key element in the success of the Normandy landings. It diverted more than 10,000 high velocity anti-aircraft guns and half a million soldiers to the defense of the Reich—assets that would definitely have played a more useful role on the battlefield. It had a direct impact on the morale of German civilians, although how that impact actually translated into an Allied advantage is difficult to calculate. It wrecked the German oil industry and from summer 1944 on had a significant impact on the mobility of German ground forces.¹⁷ Finally, the destruction that it wreaked on the transportation network in fall and winter of 1944 prevented

the Nazis from making a last stand among the ruins of the Thousand Year Reich.¹⁸ Consequently, it is clear that the strategic bombing of Germany was as vital to victory as the battles on the Eastern Front, or the struggle to control the sea lanes of the North Atlantic, or Allied ground operations in Western Europe after June 6. There was nothing pretty or redeeming about the effort itself; but there was *no other choice*.

Similarly, when it comes to dropping the atomic bomb on Japan, one must look beyond the horror of that event to examine what other courses of action were available. The argument that the enemy was ready to surrender at that point in the war, to put it bluntly, is virtually unsupported by the evidence except in unrealistic proposals that the Japanese foreign ministry sent to Moscow but which it was careful not to inform its military masters about because of the consequences.

By August 1945 the American military had determined on an invasion of the Home Islands that would begin with Kyushu. The estimates provided by MacArthur's command appear to have been unrealistic in

light of Okinawa and Iwo Jima, especially when intelligence already indicated that the Japanese were concentrating most of their forces on Kyushu along southern beaches where landings would occur.¹⁹ But even MacArthur's estimates, however low they appear in retrospect (approximately 40,000 killed and 200,000 total casualties), were equivalent to the casualty level suffered by the Army from Normandy to the Bulge.²⁰ As one historian pointed out, any President who allowed U.S. forces to suffer such casualties without first using the atomic bomb would have faced immediate impeachment given the political realities of 1945.²¹

But the most terrible results of a refusal by America to use the bomb would have impacted on the Japanese themselves. Fighting on Kyushu would have visited a terrible fate on that island's peasant population, and not only would the fighting have killed tens of thousands, but starvation in the Home Islands as well as mass suicides aided and abetted by the Japanese military (as happened on Okinawa) would have swollen the

number of civilian casualties. Finally, one might also note that prolonged combat on Kyushu would undoubtedly have resulted in Soviet operations against Hokaido and perhaps the main island itself with a resulting Soviet zone of occupation in the north that would have had a devastating impact on post-war Japan.

The terrible war on which the survival of democracy depended did not halt the endless struggles that Thucydides foretold in *The Peloponnesian War*; but democratic values survived and, under the leadership of the United States, those values were maintained throughout another great contest that lasted almost to the end of this century. But the great victories of 1945 and 1989 were attributable to the will of America to defend its values and traditions with the lives of its young men and women. The long white rows of markers in Arlington and cemeteries across Europe and the Pacific bear mute testimony to that courage and dedication. **JQ**

*Awaiting Take-off,
Aleutians* by Ogden
Pleissner.



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NOTES

¹ See MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 1984), pp. 1–57.

² In the case of Belgrade, Operation Gericht (Punishment) killed some 17,000 Serbs. On German attitudes toward strategic bombing at the beginning of the war, see Williamson Murray, *German Military Effectiveness* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing, 1992), pp. 39–52.

³ At Le Paradis soldiers of the SS *Totenkopf* Division killed no fewer than 110 members of the Royal Norfolk Regiment, but the authorities never investigated the incident. George H. Stein, *The Waffen SS, Hitler's Elite Guard at War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 76–78.

⁴ Guides to Normandy indicate that 18 Canadian bodies were found at Abbe d'Ardennes, headquarters of the 12th SS Panzer Division outside Caen. A recent visit to the site revealed that 27 bodies now have been discovered, and according to a local construction foreman the number goes up each year.

⁵ See Max Hastings, *Das Reich, The March of the 2nd SS Panzer Division through France* (London: Papermac, 1993) for a further discussion of the murderous activities of the division as it moved north from Toulouse to Normandy.

⁶ Peiper and fellow criminals were condemned to death by an American military court, but the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment through the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and they were then almost immediately released by the post-war West German government.

⁷ The Soviets, not surprisingly, contested that number, but even their figures suggest that millions of their soldiers fell into German hands during the course of the campaign.

⁸ For details on the savage treatment of Soviet POWs by the German army during the war, see Kristian Streit, *Keine Kameraden, Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ On the German army's enthusiastic support for the final solution see Horst Boog et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), pp. 413–51; Jürgen Förster, "Hitler's War Aims Against the Soviet Union and the German Military Leaders," *Militärhistorik Tidshrift* (1979), pp. 83–93; Christian Streit, "The German Army and the Policies of Genocide," in *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany*, Gerhard Hirschfeld, editor (London: German Historical Institute, 1986).

¹¹ See Peter Williams and David Wallace, *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

¹² One of the most disgraceful post-war decisions was not to bring those Japanese involved in bacteriological warfare to trial. Instead the authorities decided to enlist their help in the American program. This undoubtedly raised the suspicion of the Chinese and explains why they accused the United States of using such weapons during the Korean War.

¹³ No one at the time foresaw how extraordinary German actions would be in the war. One historian argues that London could have reached an acceptable accommodation with Berlin in 1940 to save the empire. But Churchill dragged Britain down a road of slavish surrender to American interests—one that inevitably spelled destruction of the empire. What such an argument misses, of course, is the nature of Hitler's regime and that any accommodation, as Vichy France illustrates, would have led to a surrender of the British soul. For an exposition of this position, which reveals how far historians can be removed from reality, see John Charmley, *Churchill: The End of Glory: A Political Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1993).

¹⁴ Franz Halder, *The Halder War Diaries, 1939–1942*, Charles Burdick and Hans Adolf Jacobsen, editors (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), entry for August 11, 1944, p. 506.

¹⁵ Klaus Reinhardt, *Die Wende vor Moskau, Das Scheitern der Strategie Hitlers im Winter 1941/1942* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1972), p. 140.

¹⁶ For a detailed exposition of the combined bomber offensive, see Williamson Murray, "Reflections on the Combined Bomber Offensive," *Militärhistorische Mitteilungen*, vol. 51 (1992), Heft 1.

¹⁷ For example, when the Soviets hit Silesia in January 1945 the Germans had 1,800 tanks to defend the province, but no fuel. As a result most of Silesia fell into Soviet hands in less than a week. Sir Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany*, vol. 3 (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1962), p. 239.

¹⁸ See in particular Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Collapse of the German War Economy, 1944–1945; Allied Air Power and the German National Railway* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

¹⁹ It is more likely that the level of ferocity and losses would have replicated Okinawa. But instead of 200,000 casualties, America would probably have suffered as much as twice that among its ground and naval forces.

²⁰ Americans in the Pacific had fewer illusions about the level of casualties in an invasion of the Home Islands than MacArthur's staff or historians born years later. See Paul Fussell, "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb: Hiroshima, A Soldier's View," *The New Republic* (August 22–29, 1981), pp. 26–30.

²¹ Peter Mazlowski, "Truman, the Bomb, and the Numbers Game," *Military History Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1995), pp. 103–07.

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