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THE WAR THAT JUSTIFIED OTHER WARS

by Laurence M. Vance
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Even among some libertarians, World War II is viewed as the great exception. Although it was the most destructive thing to life, liberty, and property that the world has ever seen, World War II is viewed as a good war. Although it took the lives of more than 50 million people, World War II is viewed as a moral war. Although it killed more civilians than combatants, World War II is viewed as a noble war. Although it wounded hundreds of millions, World War II is viewed as a just war. Although it made hundreds of millions of refugees, widows, and orphans, World War II is viewed as a necessary war. The invoking of Hitler, Nazism, and World War II is supposed to forever constitute the definitive refutation of pacifism, shame conscientious objectors, discredit anti-war sentiments, serve as a trump card in all discussions of the morality of war, and, especially, silence critics of U.S. military interventions.

Ted Grimsrud will have none of that. He is the author of the new book *The Good War That Wasn't — And Why It Matters* that engages "in a moral evaluation of World War II." Grimsrud is Professor of Theology and Peace Studies at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He has written four other books, including *A Pacifist Way of Knowing: John Howard Yoder's Pacifist Epistemology* (2010). This is not the first time that Grimsrud has written on

World War II. His doctoral dissertation was on "the phenomenon of conscientious objection to World War II." He has two simple theses: (1) World War II was morally problematic, not morally good; and (2) there are alternatives to war that address authentic moral concerns raised by injustice and tyranny.

Unlike other recent writers on the subject of the morality of World War II — Michael Bess in *Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (2006) and Michael Burleigh in *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (2010) — Grimsrud tends to "assume that all wars are deeply morally problematic rather than to assume that, of course, some wars are appropriate." Indeed, "no war could possibly be good." World War II is not the great exception. American participation in World War II is not "self-evidently just and morally good," and neither was it "necessary," as the overwhelming majority of Americans assume. Grimsrud believes that this approach allows him to scrutinize the war "more critically" than if he didn't start with that assumption.

Although the author grew up believing that World War II was a "good war," three sources shaped his "disbelief in the moral legitimacy of war." First, his parents: "proud veterans" whose "values of kindness and respect ran deeper than their values of patriotism." Second, his coming of age at the tail end of the Vietnam War: when he "became more interested in war issues." And third, his theological reflection: as his faith deepened he "came to the conviction that as a follower of Jesus" he "could not support war in any form." It was only after reaching "clarity" in his convictions that Grimsrud "began to read Mennonite writings on pacifism and sought to converse with actual Mennonites," attend a Mennonite seminary, and join a Mennonite congregation. The author's background is important because he cannot simply be dismissed as a lifelong Mennonite pacifist who just blindly rejects the justness of any war. Indeed, he has "several reasons to be positively disposed toward the War" and "no direct personal reasons not to be."

Evaluating the war

Although the author is a "convinced" and a "committed" pacifist, he evaluates World War II "pragmatically, not ideologically." He draws on "accepted just war criteria and the moral values that advocates for the War themselves established as the grounds for American participation." And although he does not see "the just war theory to be an adequate moral response to the question of support for war," he believes it "offers us a framework for evaluating the morality of particular wars." But along with "the more abstract traditional just war criteria," the author also

seeks “to use as bases for moral evaluation the stated ideals that American leaders and their allies used to justify involvement in this war.” When he comes to negative conclusions about the war, Grimsrud does so in terms of how it fell short of “the moral criteria war proponents themselves articulated.”

Grimsrud describes *The Good War That Wasn’t — And Why It Matters* as “an essay in moral philosophy with historical illustrations.”

It is an essay in moral philosophy because from start to finish “warfare is infused with moral choices, moral convictions, and moral priorities.” Indeed, “If we looked at every war that societies have fought we would see that the rationale for the war and, especially, the appeals that were made to gain people’s support and participation in the war were overtly couched in moral terms.” This is especially true concerning World War II and Americans, who “supported the War, risked their lives and their children’s lives, and made other sacrifices mostly without complaint because they believed in the moral importance of this war.” Americans’ “involvement in the War followed from certain moral convictions.”

The author makes no claims to originality in his use of the historical cases. The bases for his negative portrayal of “World War II and its moral legacy” are “actual events of history, open for evaluation by everyone, pacifist or not.” But his main goal is “to raise questions” — “questions that are not often asked” — not “to provide new information.” Grimsrud has three sets of questions and issues he wants to engage: whether World War II “had just causes and employed just means”; the aftermath of the war, especially as it “shaped U.S. foreign policy in the years since”; and “the viable nonviolent alternatives to seeking human well-being in the face of tyranny.”

Thus, *The Good War That Wasn’t — And Why It Matters* naturally has three parts: Total War, Aftermath, and Alternatives. Part 1 looks at three questions: (1) why America entered World War II, (2) whether America’s conduct in the war was just, and (3) what the human and political costs of the war were. Part 2 examines (1) the Pax Americana that emerged after the War, (2) the Cold War, and (3) the U.S. squandering of the “peace dividend” after the Cold War and its quest for militarized global domination. Part 3 presents (1) pacifists and war resisters before and during World War II, (2) the Civil Rights and anti-nuclear movements, and (3) the service committees and anti-war activism. The book’s valuable conclusion is included in part 3, but should not be seen as part of it. The book also has a brief preface, a long and important

introduction, a bibliography, a name index, a subject index, and, something that is getting scarcer every day, footnotes.

The most important part of the book is, of course, the first part, so that will be the focus of my review.

In exploring why America entered World War II, Grimsrud first briefly surveys the world's political and historical climate in the years between the two world wars. He chronicles Franklin Roosevelt's actions to move the country toward intervening in yet another European war. "For the last time in American history," says Grimsrud, "a president assumed he must defer to the Constitutional requirement for a formal declaration of war by Congress." Grimsrud points out many inconvenient truths about the war:

- As late as 1936, Germany bought more arms from American companies than from sources in any other country but two.
- Poland, like Germany, was ruled by a militaristic, right-wing dictatorship.
- Unlike Poland, Czechoslovakia, which capitulated to the Germans, came through the war relatively unscathed.
- The Soviet Union would have defeated Germany even without much involvement from the United States and Britain.
- Hitler took initiative after initiative toward the British in hopes of ending the war in the West.
- American involvement in the war had virtually nothing to do with "saving Jews."
- Chiang Kai-shek was far from a supporter of democracy.
- Japan's expansionistic policies in the Far East threatened America's own imperialistic interests in the region.
- Britain's conflict with Japan stemmed from Japan's threat to its colonial possessions in the Far East.
- The United States had clearly initiated actions on both fronts that made full-scale involvement in the war inevitable at some point.
- U.S. tension with Japan can be traced back to the 1850s, when American warships visited Japan with the demand that Japanese isolation from the Western world end.
- U.S. national borders were never under threat of an invasion from Germany or Japan.

And perhaps the most damning: “When the U.S. aligned itself with the Soviet Union and Nationalist China, American leaders made it clear that their war effort simply was not animated by principled opposition to tyranny — no matter what the purpose statements declared.”

Grimsrud sees America’s conduct in the war as anything but just. He bases that on the two central elements for considering just conduct in war: proportionality and noncombatant immunity. The author believes “that actions that result in the violent deaths of millions of people (perhaps three-fourths of whom were noncombatants) could be anything but at best ‘morally ambiguous’ seems obvious if the term *morality* is to have meaning.” Although Grimsrud mentions the immorality of the bombing of Dresden, Roosevelt’s policy of unconditional surrender, the firebombing of Tokyo and other Japanese major cities, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he finds the U.S. alliance with the tyrannical Soviet Union to be especially “morally problematic.” He sees Nazism and Stalinism as kindred spirits. The conduct of the war by America’s ally, Great Britain, was no better: “From the very start, the British strategy for defeating Germany relied at is core on directly targeting noncombatants in search of victory through killing, terrorizing, and dispossessing countless millions.”

The human and political costs of the war were extraordinary. Although “only” about 400,000 Americans died, the Soviet Union lost as many as 26 million. Nations “caught in the crossfire” suffered millions of casualties as well, including as many as 20 million in China. Up to 80 percent of the deaths in the war were nonfighting civilians. Owing to the effects of famine and disease, the total number of deaths caused by the war cannot be calculated.

One thing Grimsrud points out that one rarely hears about is the serious and long-lasting psychological trauma that afflicted thousands of American soldiers. By July 1943, 10,000 soldiers per month were discharged for psychiatric reasons. In 1945, more than 10,000 soldiers per month were diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. And then there is the death and destruction caused to animals and the physical environment.

The Allied policy of unconditional surrender “cut off the possibility of negotiating with the Nazis concerning their treatment of the Jews.” Indeed, “the Allies did next to nothing to mitigate the horrors of the Holocaust, even when they could have.” And “the Nazi defeat was, if anything, a victory for totalitarian communism not democracy.” The United States would never be the same after the war: “American democratic governance was transformed with the emergence of military-oriented institutions such as the Pentagon, Central Intelligence Agency, and nuclear-weapons programs.

The afterward

Grimsrud doesn't let up in part 2. He documents how Pax Americana replaced Pax Britannica. The conquered nations of Japan and Germany became locations for "massive permanent American military establishments" and "pawns in the Cold War." American corporations profited greatly from arms contracts and the coercive might of the American military to aid in "solidifying their global presence when it was resisted."

The war transformed the United States "from a relatively demilitarized, relatively democratic society into the world's next great empire." The CIA — which initially "misread virtually every global crisis" and subsequently "actually provided little reliable information concerning the Soviet Union" — and the National Safety Council diminished "democratic oversight of American foreign policy." Military spending exploded, the government of Iran was overthrown (the repercussions of which we are still experiencing), the government of Guatemala was overthrown, and unnecessary, undeclared wars were fought in Korea and Vietnam (killing millions more). The United States failed to turn away from its militarism after the end of the Cold War and found a new enemy to replace the Soviet Union and justify the national-security state.

"World War II was the ultimate test for American pacifists," begins Grimsrud in part 3. Most of them unfortunately failed the test, thanks to "prowar propaganda from the Roosevelt administration" and, of course, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Grimsrud traces the history of war resistance in America from the Quakers in colonial Pennsylvania to early peace societies to interwar pacifist organizations to conscientious objectors in World War II to the Civil Rights and anti-nuclear movements. He devotes a whole chapter to three service committees: the American Friends Service Committee, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Catholic Worker. In it he also focuses attention on anti-war activism and draft resistance during the Vietnam War. He faults the transformation in America wrought by the rise of the national-security state after World War II as responsible for the "sustenance of militarist dynamics even in the face of such a major failure as Vietnam."

Grimsrud concludes that when he applies "the just war criteria to the American involvement to World War II" he finds that "it was not a just war." The United States "did not enter World War II for just cause or prosecute it with just means." And "certainly the wars the U.S. has engaged in since World War II have even less chance of meeting the criteria for just wars."

World War II was simply "an exercise in mass killing and unleashed militarism." It transformed the United States "from a nonmilitarized, relatively free and democratic nation to a global power that became seemingly unable to turn away from a devastatingly self-destructive pursuit of empire." The war provided "an opportunity for the military to move into an unprecedented place of power and influence within the federal government, and it was an opportunity for American corporations to profit immensely from the U.S. becoming the one global economic superpower."

The author recognizes that "seriously to doubt the justness of World War II is almost entirely unheard of." He points out that "even historians who raise questions about the war's justness almost invariably conclude that indeed the War ultimately was just." And of course, for the large majority of historians, "simply to raise moral questions about the War is unacceptable." For Americans, World War II stands as "the war that justified other wars."

I cannot recommend *The Good War That Wasn't — And Why It Matters* highly enough. Unlike World War II, the book is both good and necessary. And it is also an eminently readable, brilliant, tour de force that wastes no words and leaves no moral stone unturned. It is absolutely essential for any assessment of the morality, justness, and consequences of World War II.