

Canadian Military History

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 8

3-7-2017

"The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War Revised Edition (Book Review) by Jacques R. Pauwels

Brad St. Croix

Recommended Citation

St. Croix, Brad () ""The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War Revised Edition (Book Review) by Jacques R. Pauwels," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol26/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War Revised Edition*, 2nd ed. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 2015. Pp. 326.

American involvement in the Second World War has been questioned by left leaning writers, academics, and other individuals since the conflict began. Jacques R. Pauwels' revised edition of *The Myth of the Good War: America in the Second World War* continues this tradition in a non-traditional manner. It challenges traditional perceptions of the United States government's goals during the conflict while engaging with the established historiography. The objective of the book is twofold. First, Pauwels states that the primary factor in motivating the United States government during this period was private corporate profit rather than idealism and altruism as is normally presented when invoking the concept of the 'good war' (p. 7). This includes examining decisions that affected the entrance of the United States into the war and its conduct before, during, and after the fighting had taken place. While Pauwels struggles with labels, this is a revisionist work. The second primary objective is to challenge how historical works are created and the audiences they are intended for. Traditional works, Pauwels argues, often only tell part of the story. He argues these types of works are inaccessible to the general reader (p. 11). Pauwels attempts to right this wrong by presenting an encompassing work on the reasons that led the United States to enter and become involved in the Second World War.

Pauwels' sources appear to form the support for his primary challenge to traditional historical scholarship. He rejects the use of primary sources and only employs secondary sources. This creates issues with his arguments, which I will return to later. In terms of the actual prose there are no noteworthy problems. The writing is accessible and clear throughout the work, which contributes well to the goal to reach a more general audience. However, his argumentation suffers from a lack of clarity at numerous points and leaps in logic negatively detract from the overall argument. When there is no evidence for one direction or another the author assumes the case supports his conclusions. For example, when discussing profits made during the war by enterprises with an American parent in occupied Europe, Pauwels states, we cannot be sure who reaped the profits. He seems to have assumed that these profits ended up in the bank accounts of American bankers, which supports his thesis

that American participation was motivated by financial gain (p. 235). This is one example of many present throughout the text. There are also a few historical mistakes made in the text that call into question the author's attention to detail. The Allied landings in North Africa are said have to taken place in November 1941 in relation to diplomatic relations with Vichy, which is over a year before the United States actually entered the war (p. 54). Pauwels claims that the Red Army stopped pillaging after passing through East Prussia (p. 185). This is blatantly false as most works on the eastern front note this behaviour continued well into the Red Army's advance into Germany.¹ Mistakes such as these detract from the arguments made throughout the book, and one wonders what other mistakes may be present. Overall execution leaves much to be desired as the book is filled with editing and historical errors that detract from the author's overall argument.

Methodology is as much of a part of the argument as is the approach. Pauwels' decision to use only secondary sources supports his attempt to introduce a revisionist view to a wider audience. This goal creates more problems than it solves. Relying only on secondary sources can be done if one's goal is to understand changing perspectives on a topic. However, Pauwels' use of secondary sources seems to be an attempt to argue about historical events and reach conclusions about the war and the events that shaped the Cold War. These arguments are not fully developed as the result of this methodology. One positive that does result from this approach is the wide geographic range of sources made available, such as works from the western European nations Italy, France, and Germany. Unfortunately, despite using a broad research base, the sources utilised do not add depth to the argument. The author claims that a wider geographic scope of sources will benefit our understanding of the American involvement in the war. While this effort is commendable, the sources used in the book do not provide differing perspective; they only confirm previous conclusions.

¹ Gerhard Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 786; Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (New York: Back Bay Book, 2012), 689; Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany, 1944-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 477.

Pauwels' writing is disjointed at times and he makes connections between far ranging and unconnected events. This may be a reflection of his goal to reach a wide audience but the examples provided frequently require further explanation. Pauwels also writes off topic from his primary topic of American involvement in the Second World War. For instance, while analysing the war in Italy, Pauwels digresses to discussions of the drug underworld connection to the war against the Sandinistas and the sixteenth century political theory of *cuius region eius religio* (pp. 119, 121). Anecdotes such as this appear to be intended to help the reader, but they expand the evidence beyond the context of the thesis. Detours in the writing detract from the argument. Understanding Central America politics in the 1980s or European religious rule does not support the argument that the Second World War was not necessarily the 'good war'.

The Myth of the Good War fits into the new left historiography on the Second World War that arose during the 1960s particularly in the United States. Pauwels relies heavily on scholars such as Gar Alperovitz, William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Howard Zinn to frame his argument. His work is difficult to situate in the literature as, in my opinion, it does not add much to our existing understanding; the book technically offers no new information due to the sole use of secondary sources. This, however, does not prevent Pauwels from asserting bold claims, such as the Second World War was won with the Soviet victory in the battle of Moscow in 1941, or that the Allies were ready to invade northern France in 1942 (pp. 9, 95). Pauwels continues the new left tradition of highlighting the supposed lack of Allied support, through avoiding combat with Nazi Germany, for the Soviet Union early in the war. This is coupled with the argument that the American and British high command and politicians wanted the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany to slaughter each other on the eastern front. Arguing that the invasion of Western Europe was postponed due to sinister ulterior motives is but one example of an argument being made with no proper documentation. This work may seem to add to our understanding of the conflict, but claims are made without any primary evidence and only tenuous support from secondary works. Primary documents, had they been used, would alleviate these concerns.

Pauwels' work is not intended for an academic audience. His introduction makes this quite clear and, therefore, the book is not recommended for academic readers. Historical errors and leaps in logic

demonstrate that this work should not be used in a formal education setting. I do, however, recommend it for a general audience interested in a compilation of revisionist ideas on America's involvement in the Second World War. I caution readers to think critically when moving through the text and to be mindful of the historical misinterpretations

BRAD ST. CROIX, *UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA*