

G. Kurt Piehler, ed. *The United States in World War II: A Documentary Reader.*

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- 1 The Second World War commenced in 1939 when Germany's Nazi regime invaded the nation-state of Poland. The violation of Polish sovereignty by both Germany and the Soviet Union compelled the British and the French to stand alongside their Polish allies as was stipulated in pre-existing treaty obligations. In spite of Nazi-Soviet cooperation in Poland, war between the two ultimately came to fruition in 1941 when Hitler initiated Operation Barbarossa. With all major powers involved in the war, including Japan and its imperialistic drive for power in Asia and the Pacific since the early 1930s, the USA continued to sit on the sidelines due to a non-interventionist sentiment held by many Americans. This changed late in 1941 when Japan led a sneak attack against the USA at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. In less than a year after intense mobilization for war led by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, American forces were engaged in two theatres of combat: the European war, and the Asian-Pacific war. World War II went on to last until 1945 when Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany were finally defeated. History has represented this war as 'the good war' or as an example of a just war. The participation of the US in combatting against Nazism in Europe, for example, was of great significance. Defeating Japanese militarism in Asia was likewise of vital importance not just for the US in terms of seeking justice for the attack on Pearl Harbor, but also for liberating Asia from Japanese hegemony. While in many respects that might be the case, G. Kurt Piehler's book provides a more nuanced and critically engaged approach to evaluating the role, impact, and legacy of US involvement in the Second World War. Just consider the first chapter of the volume which is titled *The Controversial War*, or other topics addressed such as the loss of civil rights for particular minorities, the utilization of strategic bombing of urban centers, and the decision to use atomic weapons against civilian populations. Although America's participation in the war is essentially a narrative of victory and triumph, Piehler's selection of documents and summaries appropriately explore the "ambiguity, and a number of paradoxes, that surround this conflict."

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The volume is divided into twelve thematic topics. While there is standard coverage of military and diplomatic aspects of WWII, Piehler includes a range of valuable primary source documents dealing with areas such as the mobilization of the home front, discriminatory policies, the US and the Holocaust, postwar prospects, the legacy of the war, and a final section on commemoration and memory. In addition, Piehler includes a fourteen page introduction in the volume which adequately sets up the key developments and parameters of US involvement in the Second World War as well as outlining particular shortcomings associated with American practices in executing the war. For example, he states the following about seeing WWII simply as ‘the good war’: “...it was not a good war for all. Mobs attacked Jehovah’s Witnesses because of their refusal to salute the American flag. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese American living on the West Coast were deprived of their civil liberties without trial and forced to enter internment camps run by the federal government. Racism still remained endemic in American society; the United States fought with a segregated military, and African Americans continued to be denied the right to vote through much of the South.” These comments are valuable and warrant being stated. The inclusion of documents dealing specifically with these issues gives added importance to this volume. Piehler’s editing of the excerpts is handled quite well in that there is a sufficient length of each entry without undermining the meaning and weight of the excerpt. This in turn permits him to include a greater scope of documents and range of topics in the volume. Taken as a whole, therefore, Piehler’s documentary reader on the US in World War II contains an excellent selection of primary source documents and background text summaries which provide readers with a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the US and the war, its impact on the US, and the foundations of US power in the postwar world.

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