

The Storm of War  
A New History of the Second World War  
Andrew Roberts

A Review by Stephen Doliber  
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The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War by Andrew Roberts has been praised as the best single volume history about the Second World War. Roberts gives a vivid account of this, the definitive event of the Twentieth Century that cost over 50 million lives (more than the current population of Spain today) and more than 1.5 trillion dollars. In his account, which addresses most of the major battles of the war in Europe as well as a number of battles in the Pacific, Roberts evaluates the reasons why these battles were either won or lost and how these battles influenced the final outcome of the war.

According to Roberts, the Second World War “was to be the world’s first wholly politically ideological war, and it is the contention of this book that that was the primary reason why the Nazis eventually lost it.” (Roberts, p. 19) One example of Roberts’s theory of how Nazi ideology lost the war was Operation Barbarossa, or the German invasion of the Soviet Union. It was far more complex than simply invading Russia too late in the year, the disastrous effect of the Soviet winter or the unexpected total civilian resistance. “If the German Army had been instructed to embrace this anti-Bolshevik behavior, and do all in its power to encourage anti-Soviet nationalism, the story of Barbarossa might have been very different. Yet, that was not the Nazi way: these regions were earmarked for *Lebensraum*, so wholesale ethnic cleansing followed, and naturally forced the local populations into outright opposition and partisan activity....Here, yet is another crucial instance of Nazi ideology interfering with Germany’s military best interests.” Roberts (p. 163) In other words, Roberts argues that, had German forces

acted as liberators and had they not so savagely crushed the local civilian populations, the Russian people may have supported the German forces rather than responding with total resistance. Roberts also applies this theory to the Japanese in the war in the Pacific, believing that the peoples of the European colonies in Asia might well have welcomed the Japanese as liberators. The Japanese, instead, were cruel invaders who routinely enslaved, raped, tortured and killed the local populations. “Western accounts of the war often minimize, to the point of sometimes ignoring it altogether, the experience of China, despite the fact that fifteen million of those who died in the conflict – a full 30 per cent - were Chinese.” (p. 267-8)

Roberts’s thesis of the war lost by Germany due to Nazi ideology is not just the focus on lebensraum or on the final solution or on the superiority of the Aryan Race but on the belief in the infallibility of Der Fuhrer himself as a leader and, more importantly, as a military strategist. Unfortunately for Germany and fortunately for the Allies, Hitler continually made strategic error after error, often with catastrophic effects. It was these miscalculations and refusal to concede when errors had been made (Hitler frequently issued orders to stand and fight to the last man rather than surrender) that cost Germany the war. “It was extraordinary, considering that the war’s outcome had not been in doubt since the destruction of Army Group Centre in the summer of 1944 that the Wehrmacht continued to operate as an efficient, disciplined fighting force well into the spring of 1945. As many as 400,000 Germans were killed in the first five months of 1945 – entirely unnecessarily, as the chances of Germany winning the war were negligible for the whole of that time.” (p. 548)

Much of Roberts's book is in support of his theory that Germany lost the war, and mostly through Hitler's strategic blunders, rather than the war being won by the Allies. But, if Roberts does give credit to anyone for winning the war it would be to the Soviets " A general Staff commission in 1988-9 reported ...that those who died [in the red Army] in action or from wounds, illness or accidents or were killed as POWs or shot for cowardice – had numbered 8,668,400, with a further eighteen million casualties from wounds, illness, frostbite, and so on...and civilian losses around sixteen million." (p.556) Yet, "There can be no doubt, despite the numbers killed, who was the greatest territorial victor of the Second World War. For Britain, the victory brought near-bankruptcy, national exhaustion, and years of grinding austerity...France also lay in the dust for over a decade. Nor did the war add any territorial acquisitions the United States, which wished for none. Yet the war left the USSR battered but militarily supreme, in control of not only the whole of her pre-war territory, but also that of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, the eastern half of Germany and large parts of Austria...Yugoslavia and Finland were effectively client states..."(561-2) Granted, much of Soviet weapons, equipment and technology after the initial stages of Operation Barbarossa came from the United States (Roberts talks about how the German arms and armaments were superior to those of the Allies; they simply could not produce enough of them). "Hitler's great error – perhaps the second worst of his many blunders of the war next to invading Russia prematurely – was to not appreciate the potential capacity of American production." ..."The entry of the United States into the war is of no consequence at all for Germany,' Hitler had told Molotov in Berlin on 12 November 1940, 'the United States will not be a threat to us in decades – not in 1945 but at the

earliest in 1970 or 1980.’ It was one of the greatest miscalculations in history (p.195)  
“By 1943 the number of aircraft lost at Pearl Harbor represented only two days of American production, and in the calendar year 1944, while the Germans were building 40,000 warplanes, the United States turned out 98,000, underlining Hitler’s catastrophic blunder.” (p.194)

I am by no means a Second World War expert but I did grow up in its aftermath and with a father and a number of uncles (along with all of my friends’ fathers) who fought in the war. Movies about the Second World War were almost as popular as westerns (westerns often starring war hero Audie Murphy) and the heroes were almost always the Americans. Roberts’s book, for the most part, downplays the impact of the American military on the outcome of the war in Europe, but not the American war production. But, even more noticeable, is Roberts’s disdain for the role of the French in the Second World War, with little regard for the efforts of the French Resistance until later in the war, of the French acceptance of German occupation or of the Vichy puppet government, and, most of all of General Charles de Gaulle. The Storm of War is a very readable, battle-focused book that I would recommend to anyone interested in learning a new interpretation and understanding of the events of 1939 to 1945.

## Bibliography

Roberts, Andrew. *The Storm of War: a New History of the Second World War*. New York: Harper, 2011..