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Norman Stone, *World War Two: A Short History*. New York: Basic Books, 2012. Pp. xxvi, 238. ISBN 978-0-465-01372-2.

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Norman Stone's primer on World War II is a worthy successor to its pithy and insightful predecessor on the First World War, published in 2009. The chief strengths of this latest volume are Stone's ability to connect the two world wars and his mastery of the history of the European theater, particularly the Eastern Front and the cataclysmic struggle between Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Stone firmly affixes blame for the war on Nazi Germany and its quest for world power, even as he criticizes the United States for bungling its responsibilities after World War I, France for its overly defensive and cautious military strategy and feckless foreign policy, and Great Britain for its doomed tactic of appeasing a bellicose Nazi regime. France and Britain, as Stone rightly notes, were both severely traumatized by World War I; the last option either country wanted to pursue was another war against Germany. But Hitler was not to be appeased, and the war came.

Stone's heroes are Winston Churchill in particular, and the British in general: "Poland was the martyr of the Second World War, as Great Britain was the hero, and the United States the victor" (28). The reactionary Churchill, a product of the Victorian age, instinctively recognized the radical revolutionary in Hitler, concluding there was no chance to compromise with the man, his methods, or his military. Churchill was "the first real rock that Hitler encountered"; feeble alliances and lesser men "could be swept aside, but not Churchill" (23). It is hard to disagree.

If Churchill is Stone's immovable object, the Soviet Army is his irresistible force, though it did not seem that way to Hitler (or anyone else) in summer 1941. "We'll kick the [Soviet] door in and the [whole rotten] house will fall down," Hitler predicted, combining histrionic hubris with wild optimism. As a result,

The strategic planning for Barbarossa was slapdash, and almost no one objected. Hitler was a provincial figure, and had shot far beyond his natural level; success like this [in Poland, France, and elsewhere] turned his head. A Bismarck or a Churchill could control success of this order, a Hitler not. He thought he was infallible, that "Providence" was looking after him. He was going to be Germany's Alexander the Great, overthrowing the tyrannical regime of the East. (56)

In a sense, Hitler launched a crusade against the Soviet Union, an (un)holy war against the "barbaric" Slavs and the "conniving" and (in his demented view) racially inferior Jews. Blinded by a crusader's zeal, Hitler let his radical vision of a greater Germany in the east obscure the harsh reality of a primitive and unforgiving land. "The door had been kicked in and the house was indeed falling down, but only in places. It was, after all, a vast house, the Soviet Union, sixty times the size of Germany" (63).

Stone recounts the familiar story of the German Army's defeat before Moscow in December 1941, the folly of Stalingrad a year later, and the failure at Kursk in summer 1943. By then, the Germans knew they could not win, a harsh reality that did not stop them from fighting fanatically until their führer's pathetic suicide in a Berlin bunker on 30 April 1945: "Hitler was not a very good Siegfried, and Eva Braun was no Brünnhilde. He had told her to stay for her safety in south Germany, but she managed to fly into Berlin just before the Russians got there, announcing that it would be a terrible shame if Adolf did not marry her this time: what would history think if she only counted as his mistress? The Third Reich thus ended with a sort of shot-gun wedding and then a mismanaged cremation" (177).

Hitler bequeathed a Berlin where the city center "was just rubble, and on the Siegesallee (Victory Avenue) the lumpish busts of the charmless rulers of Brandenburg glowered out over the waste of weeds, burnt shrubbery, and the corpses of animals that had escaped from the nearby zoo" (xii).

Stone's high-energy prose keeps his book from degenerating into a tepid summary of battle after battle, campaign after campaign. He describes Italian Fascism, for example, as growing out of Italy's wartime of-

ficer corps, “men who could only find a way forward in a sort of respectable protection racket” (xx); the Allied victors of 1918 “look, in the official portrait, like a caricature-version Mount Rushmore of humbug and smugness” (5). His terse description of Dwight Eisenhower as “cunningly genial” (161) is unequalled. Not all will agree, however, that, when the French looked to Britain for help in 1939, all they really expected was “a skirling of pipes at the gangplank in Boulogne, and a few Scottish regiments ... with the regimental mascot, a terrier, and a colonel smoking a pipe” (30). This is witty, yes, but not entirely accurate.

Stone is brusque in passing judgments: the British Bomber Offensive against Germany was wasteful of resources, the invasion of Italy in 1943 and subsequent campaigns costly sideshows, Operation Dragoon (the invasion of Southern France in August 1944) entirely unneeded; and George C. Marshall and the Americans were right to call for a cross-Channel invasion of France in 1943. These assessments will strike some historians as too glib, but Stone is to be commended for hoisting his colors proudly.

The main flaw of this book is its title: it is a “short history” not of World War II as a whole but of the war *in Europe*. Roughly ninety percent of the book is dedicated to Europe and the European Theater of Operations; the rest concerns Japan and the Pacific Theater of Operations. This disproportion is also evident in Stone’s guide to further reading (“Some Sources”): he devotes eight substantial paragraphs to Europe, but only one, and a short one (four sources), to the Pacific war. Three sketchy maps appended at the end are woefully inadequate to clarify the geography of events.

Norman Stone is always worth reading. Anyone who describes Churchill’s final prime ministership in 1951 as “a mixture of mothballs and alcohol” (xxiii) knows how to entertain. His gloss on the true meaning of the Nazi party acronym is especially biting: “the National (meaning ‘anti-foreign’) Socialist (meaning ‘stealing’) German (meaning ‘anti-Semitic’) Workers (meaning ‘lower-middle-class’) Party” (6). So, read him for his keen eye, penetrating prose, and willingness to snarl and provoke, not for a balanced or comprehensive primer on World War II.