

World War II at 80

Memory, Impact, and the World It Left Behind

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2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, one of the most dramatic and traumatic events in the history of humankind. Amid a year-long series of celebrations and commemorative events, the Editorial Board of *RSAJournal* believes it is appropriate to engage in a broader reflection on the enduring legacy of the war, the profound ways in which it has shaped the contemporary world, and what remains of its heritage. To this end, we have invited seven distinguished international historians of the United States to offer their insights on the war's lasting significance for both the United States and the world. Over the last few decades, their works have widely contributed to an in-depth knowledge of the complexity of WWII at large, and more specifically to the pivotal contribution the United States brought to the globe during and after the end of the conflict. This Forum brings together Raffaella Baritono (University of Bologna), John Bodnar (Indiana University), Ruth Lawlor (Cornell University), Andrew Preston (University of Virginia), Federico Romero (European University Institute), Emily Rosenberg (University of California) and Tom Zeiler (University

of Colorado Bolder) in a remarkable collection of brief and yet incisive reflections on various dimensions of the conflict.

Throughout these pages, we are reminded of the staggering human cost, the enduring trauma borne by survivors, the large-scale destruction of states, and the ultimate moral collapse of civilization culminating in the Holocaust. War World II was indeed a “Total War,” thrusting the world into a unique experience, that not only involved millions of soldiers from every corner of the globe, but also deeply affected civilian populations, including children, who widely and severely suffered the consequences of the conflict. Thanks to its ultimate victory and an untouched national territory, the United States emerged from the conflict as the leading power poised to usher in the “American Century” and establish a Pax Americana that would underpin the stability and lasting peace of the post-1945 Western order. A lasting liberal and multilaterally oriented project designed to survive even after the end of the Cold War, but often challenged and now profoundly revised by the second mandate of US President Donald J. Trump.

In the United States, World War II has traditionally stimulated a memory of the conflict as the “Good War,” a story mythologized by the 1998 best-selling book *The Greatest Generation* by journalist Tom Brokaw. During a decade of intense memorialization of the 50th anniversary of the WWII years, Brokaw boosted an epic narrative of American WWII veterans as embodiments of liberal individualism and patriotic virtue, emphasizing their capacity to reintegrate into civilian life through determination, ambition, and hard work. An exceptionalist narrative inevitably clashes with the harsh realities of wartime daily life as recounted by American combatants, who – far from being driven purely by patriotism – were primarily focused on surviving and protecting their comrades. This “epic” narrative often overlooks the profound impact that millions of American soldiers had on foreign societies and their natural environments.

The forum explores multifaceted issues related to gender, violence, racism, memory, the military, politics, and global governance. Each contributor offers a distinctive perspective on how these interconnected themes persist in shaping our understanding of the past and their lasting

impact on today's world. Indeed, this anniversary comes at a particularly critical juncture, as all the authors, implicitly or explicitly, recognize. A lingering question runs through this Forum: is the post-WWII order unraveling just now, are we experiencing its final demise, when all its pillars seem to be crumbling?

John Bodnar and Tom Zeiler delve into the memory of World War II as the “good” (and just) war not merely to retrace its history, but to uncover its fault lines and shed light on its darker aspects, while also exploring why certain narratives remained unchallenged until recent years.. Ruth Lawlor contributes to the understanding of popular memories of the war – and the fate of its “uncomfortable truths” – by exploring interesting “gendered narratives of defeat.” All three offer a compelling insight into the culture of memory of a conflict that – as Andrew Preston aptly puts it – “was the making of American hegemony” and established “globalism” as a paradigm for understanding and shaping world interaction and governance. The nature of the global order that was rewired after 1945 is the focal point of Raffaella Baritono, Federico Romero, and Emily Rosenberg’s essays. Focusing on Eleanor Roosevelt’s contribution, Baritono incisively examines the pitfalls and fractures of the postwar order through the lens of gender, race relations and colonialism. The last two of these authors delve into the archetypal postwar settlement – its core foundations, its crisis, and its potential eclipse. What is left of that rule-based order, concerned about “winning the peace,” and the “presumed lessons of WWII”? While the answer lies beyond the scope of this Forum, the question itself underpins all the contributions made here.

AUTHORS’ BIONOTES

Alessandra Bitumi is Assistant Professor of International History at the University of Teramo. She previously taught at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2020-2022) and held research and teaching positions at the Woodrow Wilson Center as a Fulbright Scholar, NYU, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3, and the University of Edinburgh. Her expertise relates primarily to modern European History and Transatlantic Relations. Her latest publication is *La Comunità atlantica. Europa e Stati Uniti nell'età contemporanea* (Carocci, 2023).

Matteo Pretelli is Associate Professor of the History of North America at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale,' Italy. His *Soldati e patrie: I combattenti alleati di origine italiana nella Seconda guerra mondiale* (Il Mulino, 2022), written with Francesco Fusi, is the winner of the 2025 "Will Paul Adams Award" of the Organization of American Historians for the best book of American history written in a language other than English.