

# The Telegraph

## What Fuels Our Appetite for War?

Brenda Maddox, on the occasion of the Hessel-Titman Prize for history, asks why history publishing is now completely dominated by the Second World War.

By Brenda Maddox

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Don't mention the war. And please don't show me any more books about the Second World War. As one of the judges for this year's Hessel-Tiltman Prize for history, I found myself surrounded by pictures of swastikas, iron helmets, bombers and craters.



Of the nearly four dozen books sent by PEN, the prize's administrator, a third were about the last war and its characters. The First World War barely gets a look-in – apart from Thomas Weber's *Hitler's First War*.

The titles proclaimed the overkill: *Blitz* by Juliet Gardiner, *The Second World War: a Military History* by Gordon Corrigan – not to be confused with *Moral Combat: a History of World War II* by Michael Burleigh. There were also *The SS: a New History* by Adrian Weale, *Churchill's War Lab* by Taylor Downing, *Cry Havoc* by Joe Maiolo (subtitle: "How the Arms Race Drove the World to War, 1931-1941") and *Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital* by Roger Moorhouse. Oh yes, there was also *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* by Timothy Snyder. And more.

Anticipating some pocket money by selling the books after the prize, I took the list of titles to the Notting Hill Book Shop. Sheila, the proprietor, shook her head when she saw the list. "War books don't sell," she declared.

So why are publishers commissioning them? The books are not short: Michael Burleigh's (one of the best) is 650 pages. Corrigan's is 620. The answer, it seems, is that they do sell. "Maybe Notting Hill has more pacifists than the national average," suggests the historian Andrew Roberts, whose own *Storm of War* was a bestseller in 2009.

In what seems like the even more pacific surroundings of Hay-on-Wye, there is an appetite for war. Elizabeth Haycox, the owner of Richard Booth's Bookshop, says: "People come in specifically hunting for it."

I was moved by *Bomber County*, the first book written by Daniel Swift, investigating how his grandfather (also named Daniel Swift) was shot down by a German fighter in June 1943 and washed up in North Holland. Swift answered Robert Graves's famous question – why are there no good Second World War poets – by maintaining that there are. He makes much of Dylan Thomas's 1945 poem, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London".

The notes at the back of these histories are fascinating. They show not only how many people are alive to be interviewed but also how much online material is available. What, I had wondered, was the source for Roger Moorhouse's quotation:

“Around us, whilst the bombs fell and death and destruction raged, there was a breathless quiet. Somewhere a rumble started; a terrible rolling of thunder that comes nearer”?

The answer was on page 413, where he cited “Testimony of Karl Deutman, on the website of the collective memory project at the German Historical Museum”.

Corrigan’s fine book lists as sources the Camden Local History Archive and the Mass Observation Archive, which specialises in everyday life in Britain. It also notes a report on “Young Men in Tubes: Behaviour in the Underground”. I’d like to read that.

Perhaps the demand for war books is created by supply. As a biographer, I am often asked how I choose my subjects. The answer is “new material”. Show me a trunkful of unpublished letters and I am tempted to pull out a story (as I did with my biographies of W B Yeats and D H Lawrence). The Second World War was so well documented that its records are as tantalising as a fridge full of leftovers. You won’t throw them away – so what can you make out of them?

I didn’t realise there was so much good material. It is almost irresistible. Perhaps I’ll write a war book myself.

In the end my fellow judges, Lord Egremont and Richard Davenport-Hines, and I put only one Second World War book on the shortlist: Moorhouse’s *Berlin at War*. The other contenders were Amanda Foreman’s *A World On Fire* – about the American Civil War – and Philip Mansel’s *Levant. Splendour and Catastrophe in the Mediterranean*. The winning book was Toby Wilkinson’s *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt*. But, as this marvellous book shows, the ancient Egyptians were not above killing each other either.

\* Brenda Maddox’s most recent book is *George Eliot in Love*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2009