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Andrew Roberts on the second world war

The road to hell

Jul 23rd 2009
From The Economist print edition

A British historian argues that Hitler lost the war for the same reason that he unleashed it—because he was a Nazi



Corbis

Correction to this article

The Storm of War: A New History of the Second World War. By Andrew Roberts. Allen Lane; 712 pages; £25. To be published in America by HarperCollins in 2011. Buy from Amazon.co.uk

ONLY a highly confident historian would set out to write a one-volume history of the second world war. And only a highly accomplished one could produce a book that manages to be distinctive but not eccentric, comprehensive in scope but not cramped by detail, giving due weight both to the extraordinary personalities and to the blind economic and physical forces involved.

Andrew Roberts certainly does not lack confidence and his talents are well suited to the task. His speciality is the bold sweep of narrative history, marshalling hard facts and telling anecdotes to support big judgments. For modern academic historians, his work is a bit adventurous: far safer to narrow down research to, say, the study of medieval nail prices in rural Wales.

The big theme of his new book is the interplay between Hitler's personality and Nazi Germany's fortunes on the battlefield. In brief, Mr Roberts argues that the war

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started when it did because Hitler was a Nazi, and that Germany lost it for the same reason. The Nazi leader's blunders started when he began to turn his anti-Semitic rhetoric into practice, driving many of Germany's best brains into exile. The allies won because "our German scientists were better than their German scientists", was the pithy summary of the war's outcome by one of Churchill's closest aides, Sir Ian Jacob. Excellent German engineering and ruthless use of forced labour was not enough to make up for the drain of so many clever people into exile or concentration camps. A conservative-nationalist war leadership, unshackled by Hitler's lunatic prejudices, could have developed advanced weapons far faster, perhaps even cracking the atom.

Hitler also started the war rather too early. A bigger and better U-boat fleet, for example, could have starved and crippled Britain. Sometimes he dithered, allowing the British army to escape from Dunkirk in 1940. More often it was impatience that was ruinous. Had the Axis powers finished off the British in north Africa first, they could have attacked Russia from the south as well as the east. Hitler's "stand or die" orders gravely hampered the war in the east once the tide turned. His gratuitous decision to declare war on the United States after Pearl Harbour was another catastrophe (he regarded America as a military weakling). His failure to encourage Japan to attack the Soviet Union was similarly disastrous.

Mr Roberts likes punchy pronouncements and there are some fine ones here. After Japan's initial military successes, previously contemptuous outsiders changed their minds: "From being a bandy kneed, myopic, oriental midget in Western eyes, the Japanese soldier was suddenly transformed into an invincible, courageous superman." On Hitler's geeky knowledge of military hardware, which led him constantly to second-guess his generals, he writes: "Because a trainspotter can take down the number of a train in his notebook it doesn't mean he can drive one."

The author's research brings to light some startling facts. Even war buffs may be surprised to learn that the supposedly supine Vichy regime in France executed German spies, or that more Frenchmen fought on the Axis side than with the Allies. A nutty British official in charge of Malta put Sabbath observance ahead of unloading ships, at terrible cost. Another nearly lost the vital battle for Kohima, the gateway to India, because he wanted to keep to peacetime rules restricting the use of barbed wire. Orde Wingate, the hero of the Chindits' campaign in Burma, was an ardent nudist who never bathed. (He scrubbed himself with a stiff brush, instead.) Mr Roberts is the first historian to gain access to a huge trove of personal letters and other documents assembled over 35 years by Ian Sayer, a British transport tycoon. Extracts provide Mr Roberts with some of his most telling personal anecdotes.

The most controversial part of the book will be the author's unflinching judgments about the great controversies of the war. He briskly defends dropping atom bombs on Japan; after Okinawa, the price of a conventional assault looked particularly hideous. A test detonation would have been folly. America had only two bombs, and it was the second that (narrowly) persuaded Japan to surrender. On the allied bombing of Dresden he assembles a formidable array of facts and arguments against the post-war second-guessers who see it as a war crime. He notes that a German bombing raid on Yugoslavia in 1941 killed nearly as many people. Few remember, or complain, about that.

On other issues, though, he is more counter-intuitive. He does not believe, for example, that the Soviet army's inaction during the Warsaw uprising in 1944 was a cynical attempt to let the Nazis deal with the anticommunist Polish resistance: the real reason was that the Red Army's lines of communication had been overstretched by its rapid advance westward.

Mr Roberts hops nimbly between the Pacific and the Atlantic, though Asian readers may feel a bit shortchanged: the fighting in China gets particularly short shrift. Again and again he chides his readers for overestimating the importance of famous British and American battles in the West and overlooking much larger ones on the eastern front: more than 2m Germans were killed in the east, over ten times the number who died fighting in the west. "Britain provided the time, Russia the blood, America the money and the weapons," he concludes.

He presents stylish penmanship, gritty research and lucid reasoning, coupled with

poignant and haunting detours into private lives ruined and shortened. Mr Roberts shows boyish pleasure and admiration at the great feats of arms he describes. But the underlying tones of this magnificent book are in a minor key: furious sorrow at the waste of it all.

Correction: the date of the punitive German bombing raid on Yugoslavia was 1941, not 1940 as originally stated. This was corrected on July 24th 2009.

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