

Second World War in perspective

H MONTGOMERY HYDE

NOW RISING SEVENTY, Alan John Percivale Taylor is probably the most controversial and provocative English historian alive today. As an Oxford don, he was always a very stimulating lecturer and teacher. If Harold Wilson had been Prime Minister in 1957 and not Harold Macmillan, no doubt Alan Taylor would have been appointed to the vacant Regius Chair of Modern History at Oxford instead of Professor Trevor-Roper, since the appointment is in the Prime Minister's gift. But Mr Taylor has never been noticeably in sympathy with the Tory Establishment and to have appointed him to the vacant chair in preference to Hugh Trevor-Roper was described by one commentator at the time as an act of political masochism of which Mr Macmillan could hardly have been capable. However, there have been compensations for Mr Taylor. Relief from the burden of teaching, when he relinquished his posts of university lecturer in international history and college tutor a dozen years ago, has left him free to concentrate on his writing and broadcasting. This he has succeeded in doing to the delight and instruction of countless readers and listeners and viewers, since he speaks without notes and is the only lecturer on TV I know to face the camera without visual aids. He has also become the first and, alas, the last Honorary Director of the Beaverbrook Library. By the time these words appear in print the library will have been closed and its unique contents dispersed. But it is some consolation that the manuscript collections, including the private papers of Lloyd George, Curzon and Beaverbrook himself, which Alan Taylor has carefully and lovingly arranged, are being transferred to the House of Lords Record Office where they will continue to be available for research.

Mr Taylor signalled his retirement from full-time university teaching with the publication of an illustrated history of the First World War. This was succeeded by several other notable works such as *English History 1914-1945*, the authorised biography of Lord Beaverbrook, and an edition of Frances Lady Lloyd-George's diaries. Incidentally, there is to be a sequel to the latter in the form of the lady's love letters, which is now being prepared under Mr Taylor's editorship. Meanwhile, he has followed up his history of the First World War with a most impressive volume on the Second.* It would be unfair to call it a coffee-table book, although it certainly deserves to be seen on many tables, coffee and otherwise. Unfortunately the term coffee-table has come to acquire a pejorative connotation, due perhaps to the fact that the quality of the illustrations in such works has by no means been invariably matched by that of the text. However, in the case of Mr Taylor's latest work, I can only describe the quality of both as superb. The two hundred and fifty or so pictures, of which a dozen are in colour, have been drawn from a variety of sources, British, American, Russian, German and Dutch, and they illumine the text admirably.

Mr Taylor admits that he has been composing this book for more than thirty years, during which he has been increasing his knowledge and deepening his understanding. Now he has begun to think that he has something useful to say. He has indeed. Interest in the Second World War is still strong, as the flow of war books shows, he points out, and he feels that we are far enough away from the conflict to shake off

some of the contemporary passions and illusions. 'I do not write as a partisan of any group or country,' he declares, 'though I happen to think that my country fought on the right side, and where I make a judgement on controversial topics, it is after careful consideration of all the available evidence.'

He starts with two major premises. First, that the Second World War was fought in three seas or oceans (the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and Pacific) and in four major land campaigns (Russia, North Africa and the Mediterranean, Western Europe, and the Far East). Secondly, that each of these wars had a different character, and historians have often treated them in independent narratives. 'I have tried to bind them together,' he states, 'to remember that when Pearl Harbor was attacked, the Germans had been halted in front of Moscow; that when Stalingrad was besieged, the British were winning the Battle of El Alamein; and that when the Anglo-Americans landed in Sicily, the Russians were winning the Battle of Kursk.' Thus he demonstrates by a brilliant piece of historical synthesis that the victory of 1945 was an Allied victory, to which all three great Allies contributed to the best of their ability and resources.

Unlike the First World War, which was largely fought in the same place, the plains of Flanders and north-east France, where the outcome depended mainly on masses of infantry being flung against each other, much as they had been in the time of Napoleon and earlier, the Second World War repeatedly changed its character, the various campaigns being fought largely on *ad hoc* principles of improvisation dictated by local circumstances. Only the Royal Air Force alone among the European air forces had planned its strategy in advance, but it was not until 1944 that the RAF was able to carry out the strategic bombing offensive to the full. Even so, Mr Taylor argues that mass bombing made only a marginal difference to the result.

This is a judgement which the author is quite entitled to pass, but it is a controversial one, and of course marginal is a relative term. I imagine that it would be challenged by Sir Arthur Harris, the chief of Bomber Command, who has stressed in his own book, *Bomber Offensive*, the devastating effect the offensive had upon Germany's industrial production in the last six months or so of the war, a thesis borne out by the admission of Germany's armaments and war production minister, Albert Speer, in his memoirs. Harris also argues that if we had employed the bomber force we had in 1944 a year earlier, which would have been feasible, Germany would have been defeated outright by bombing as Japan was. He adds that the two atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki only added three per cent to the already existing devastation and merely gave the Japanese a pretext for immediate surrender when they had already been defeated by area bombing of the same kind as that used against Germany.

Admittedly Harris is himself a controversial figure. Mr Taylor calls him 'a skilful publicist', and instances the thousand-bomber raid on Cologne, in May 1942, as designed for its effect on British opinion rather than the Germans. 'If the British did not bomb Germany, it would almost seem that they were not at war with her. This had been Haig's argument for the Somme and Passchendaele, and Sir Arthur Harris was the Haig of the Second World War.'

I doubt whether Sir Arthur would endorse this comparison.

A J P TAYLOR

**The Second World War. An Illustrated History*

240pp. ILLUS. HAMISH HAMILTON £5.95

On the other hand, as Mr Taylor concedes, the strategic bombing offensive against Germany had its compensations:

Over a million Germans were diverted from the factories into air-raid precautions. The factories themselves switched from producing bombers to producing fighters and this made retaliation by the Germans increasingly difficult. Even more important, the German fighters were kept at home for the defence of German cities and almost disappeared from the battlefronts. When the Allies landed in Normandy in 1944 they had complete command of the air. Similarly, the heavy flak guns, which were dangerously effective weapons against tanks, were kept in Germany. These were inestimable, though unforeseen, gains from the bomber offensive.

Mr Taylor is right to point out that when the war was virtually over the British civilian leaders from Churchill downwards hastily repudiated responsibility for the raid on Dresden which they had in fact endorsed as a military necessity when it took place only six weeks previously, in mid-February 1945, at a time when German resistance was still regarded as formidable.

Bomber Command was consigned to obscurity. Churchill did not mention it in his victory broadcast. No campaign medal was struck for it. Alone among the successful war leaders Sir Arthur Harris was not elevated to the House of Lords. Yet indiscriminate bombing had been for four years the British achievement most prized by both public opinion and statesmen.

I agree, though perhaps it would be more accurate to substitute 'area bombing' for 'indiscriminate bombing' in this context.

Every historian is faced with the problem of source material. Fortunately almost all the original British documentation, first made available to the official war historians, is now open to researchers down to 1945. There are a few exemptions in the sensitive field of secret intelligence, of which perhaps the most important are the details of how the enemy machine cyphers were broken by the cryptographers of the Government Code and Cypher School after they had been intercepted, and the uses to which they were put by theatre commanders. They revealed the enemy's operational plans and order of battle and thus, in General Alexander's words, brought a new dimension into the prosecution of the war. The operation received the code-name 'Ultra' and the story has recently been told by the officer in charge of the limited high-level distribution of this most secret material, Group Captain F W Winterbotham, in his book *The Ultra Secret*, after a great deal of trouble in obtaining clearance from the security and intelligence authorities concerned. By this time Mr Taylor's history was already in the press. There is no doubt that 'Ultra' played a vital role in our survival in 1940 and 1941, and also in the later Allied victories, since after Pearl Harbor its products were shared with the Americans. No doubt, too, Mr Taylor will make some reference to this remarkable discovery in the second edition of his excellent book.

It is noteworthy how much attention Mr Taylor pays to points of detail and small incidents as well as in his generalisations and the broad sweep which he gives to the great events which he depicts on his large canvas. One such incident, for example, relates to the end of Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, after being discovered by a Communist partisan colonel in hiding near Lake Como. Mr Taylor describes what happened with a few vivid touches.

Mussolini said, 'You have come to save me? I will give you an Empire.' Petacci fumbled under the bedclothes. When asked what she was doing, she said, 'I'm looking for my knickers.' The colonel took them a few hundred yards down the road, stood Mussolini against a wall and, when Petacci tried to protect him, shot them both. A few hours later their bodies were taken to Milan and hanged upside down outside a garage.

Similarly with the author's references to the war crimes

trials at Nuremberg and the executions 'in brutal circumstances' which followed. I was present at the trials and I can say without fear of contradiction that Mr Taylor is right about the manner in which they were carried out. We offered the services of our own experienced public hangman, Albert Pierrepoint, but the Americans, in whose zone of occupation Nuremberg was situated, refused the offer and preferred their own man, who bungled the business dreadfully. Mr Pierrepoint, with whom I subsequently discussed the matter, was horrified at what happened.

As for the charges, many of them were of course real crimes whether in war or peace, such as the murders of prisoners-of-war and the mass extermination of the Jews in concentration camps. But what of the charges of preparing for an aggressive war or waging it? As Mr Taylor remarks, all the Powers had prepared for war, and it was a common complaint against the Allied governments that they had not prepared for it adequately or even that they had failed to launch a preventive or aggressive war themselves. Churchill passed a wise verdict on the proceedings at Nuremberg when he said to General Ismay, his personal representative on the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'You and I must take care not to lose the next war.'

Alan Taylor's conclusion, with which few will disagree, is that those who experienced it know the Second World War was a war justified in its aims and successful in accomplishing them. His account of the war in this book has been described by his friend Len Deighton as a masterpiece against which all other war historians will be judged and found wanting. This is indeed high praise, but not too high for a work so lucid and logical and at the same time so original and thought provoking.

The official history of the Second World War runs to over thirty volumes, not to mention Sir Winston Churchill's six-volume account. Alan Taylor has distilled their essence and confined it within the compass of a single volume. It is a superlative achievement of historical writing.

Scheduled for next month's books & bookmen

Lord Butler	Duke of Newcastle: Whig Prime Minister
Enoch Powell	Recent Prime Ministers
Sir John Betjeman	Industrial Archaeology
Lord Snow	Moseley: a British Physicist
Auberon Waugh	Hamilton versus Regina
Nigel Nicolson	Anne Scott-James's Sissinghurst
A L Rowse	Shakespeare and the Critics
Sir John Smyth	Gallipoli
Anthony West	Charles VII of France
Roger Poole	Dr Steiner's After Babel
Cecil King	The King, the Press and the People
E F Carpenter	Hurrell Froude and the Oxford Movement
Lord Kinross	Corridors of Diplomacy
Philip Unwin	The History of Oxford University Press
Lord Longford	Peter de Rosa's Jesus
Emma Tennant	Giles Gordon's Beyond the Words
N W Pirie	The Politics of Physical Resources
Bernard Jones	Seeing Shelley Plain
Konstantin Bazarov	Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Europe
Sir Ian Jacob	Hitler's Naval War
Gavin Lambert	This Fabulous Century
Doris Lessing	Modern Psychology in Eastern Thought
H Montgomery Hyde	Crime and Sex
Hans Keller	Cornelius Cardew's Stockhausen
Tom Hopkinson	The Camera at War
Diana Mosley	Florence Nightingale and Edith Cavell
James Harding	Stendhal: Hero of the Happy Few
Martin Esslin	Pirandello
Max Egremont	George Konrad's Case Worker
Richard Ingrams	The Oldest Road
Cecil Roberts	The Rise and Fall of Venice
John Lenihan	I Taught Wittgenstein
C Northcote Parkinson	The North-West Passage
Dewi Morgan	Rome and Canterbury Through Four Centuries
Sir David Llewellyn	Land of My Fathers
J S Weiner	Atoms of Time Past
Edgar Lustgarten	Francis Camps
Frank Norman	Melvin Braag's Silken Net
Maurice Burton	The World Atlas of Birds
Eric Partridge	Broadside Ballads
James Laver	The History of Fans
Henry Pleasants	The Immortal Billie Holiday
Christopher Sykes	Orwell Reappraised
Frank Lipsius	The American Civil War
Marie Draper	The London Topographical Record
Mollie Hardwick	The Victorian Scene
F W Skinnard	Joanna Richardson's Stendhal