

Not so good war

By [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II

Michael Bess
Knopf

World War II is not only history that we think about, but history *with which* we think. Unlike any other armed conflict, this war has entered the fabric of the moral

discourse of modern men and women; one cannot imagine that discourse without the points of reference that events such as Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima and the Holocaust have provided for it.

For many, perhaps most, Americans, World War II is simply the Good War, the successful defeat of a brutal enemy by a self-sacrificial generation. Yet if we reflect not only on the Allied cause itself but also on the manner in which it was prosecuted, we might be inclined to join Studs Terkel in putting quotation marks around the phrase “Good War.” As the bitter controversy over the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay/Hiroshima exhibition in 1995 suggested, even if we agree that this war was undeniably just, we still worry over and argue about whether it was always waged justly.

Historian Michael Bess aims, in *Choices Under Fire*, to bring out the war’s moral ambiguity by focusing on those decisions made by policy makers, soldiers and ordinary citizens that “took the form of painful dilemmas, uneasy trade-offs, awful but unavoidable compromises.” He offers a “*tour d’horizon* of the war’s moral ‘hot spots’—those areas around which the most intractable and acrimonious controversy has tended to emerge.” These include the causes of war in both the European and Pacific theaters; the roles of perpetrators, rescuers and “bystanders” in the Holocaust; the bombing of civilian populations; the “moral awkwardness” of the Anglo-American alliance with Stalin’s Soviet Union; and the legal challenges of the postwar war crimes trials. Although Bess ventures a few organizing themes—the centrality of racial conflict, the barbarization of warfare, and the emergence of the quest for a global legal order—his case studies largely float free of one another and may be profitably read as an instructive collection of short stories.

One might quibble about Bess’s choice of hot spots. He says little about Japanese-American internment (which has recently found some defenders among anxious proponents of a more vigorous “war on terror”) or about the wan American response to the destruction of European Jewry. And he quickly dismisses in a footnote Daniel Goldhagen’s indictment of ordinary Germans for complicity in the Holocaust, though no one has done more than Goldhagen to set the terms of debate on that issue. On the other hand, one can hardly quarrel with the significance of the matters that Bess does address.

In each of the cases he considers, Bess combines vivid descriptions of the historical events at hand with a careful canvassing of the ethical issues they raise. He is eager

in nearly every instance to bring out the complexity of matters and the difficulty of arriving at simple moral conclusions.

Most readers will, I suspect, be grateful to Bess for the skill with which he sets up each case, and at the same time troubled by at least some of his arguments. Bess the historian is above reproach; Bess the moral philosopher is not.

For example, like most historians, Bess finds less moral clarity in the American war against Japan than in the struggle against Hitler. He cautions that “Japan’s actions in the lead-up to World War II were not, unfortunately, a historical aberration: they were rooted in a pattern of imperialist domination in Asia that went back to the late nineteenth century—a pattern in which Europeans and Americans had figured very prominently as aggressors.” Yet Bess is silent on the argument of some historians that imperial competition explains not only Japan’s actions on the path to Pearl Harbor, but the actions of the Roosevelt administration as well.

In another case in which Bess is too timid, he rightly dismisses the idea that the attacks of Japanese kamikaze pilots are evidence of an Oriental view that (as General William Westmoreland notoriously put it) “life is not important.” Yet he couples a rejection of this explanation of their actions with a simple indictment of the pilots as “patently immoral” because they violated Kantian ethics by failing to treat human life as an end in itself. Might it be that these young men were, as Bess’s own evidence suggests, working with an understanding of human life that was quite different from Kant’s and no doubt would have mystified the philosopher?

Bess devotes more pages to the Allied bombing of civilian populations—which culminated in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—than to any other single issue. This is apt, since it is here (as Hermann Göring pointed out at Nuremberg) that the Allies bloodied their hands in the most troubling fashion. In this case, Bess’s argument seems to me quite muddled. On the one hand, he embraces the prohibition in just war theory of the intentional taking of innocent civilian life, a human rights criterion by which Allied terror bombing stands condemned as “utterly barbaric.” But he then proceeds to engage in the sort of utilitarian calculations that the principal of noncombatant immunity is supposed to preclude in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Bess arrives, for example, at the conclusion that dropping the atomic bombs was a “justifiable atrocity” because it saved more American and Japanese lives than would

have been lost had the war continued by conventional means—means that would have included ongoing American slaughter of Japanese civilians. Dropping the atomic bombs was a justifiable atrocity only if one believes that it is just to commit one avoidable atrocity in order to forestall committing another.

In any case, as Bess well says, even the utilitarian solicitude he shows for Japanese life was absent among American policy makers, whose concern extended only to American troops. By 1945 all those in charge of the war on all sides had descended to a moral underworld in which horror at the taking of innocent life had nearly evaporated. This, above all, was the moral abyss that World War II opened, one that we have been trying to crawl out of ever since.