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Review of *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947* by Daniel Todman

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BOOK REVIEWS

parts where the focus on the thing itself seemed to fade into the background with a prioritisation of the larger narrative. Still, the poignant analyses of the significance of spoons, correspondence, and trinkets soon brings the reader back into the intimate space of these soldiers' daily lives and interior worlds.

There are many aspects of Schechter's work that make it a significant contribution to knowledge; most obviously is his investigation into everyday life during the war through material culture, but the interweaving experiences of the Russian and the non-Russian soldier and the male and the female soldier are undoubtedly contributory factors to the richness of the story being told here. Likewise, the dynamic between what made some of these approaches or experiences uniquely Soviet and what could be seen in parallel in other armies means that this is a book that offers much to those whose interests lie beyond the USSR.

Given the author's lively and accessible style this is surely a work that will reach an audience outside of academia, while the deeply-researched and insightful content equally makes it an invaluable addition to scholars of both the Soviet Union and those interested more broadly in the history and legacies of the Second World War. In terms of its scholarly use though, as has been noted by others, the lack of bibliography is a frustrating omission in what is otherwise a nicely produced publication.

Thus, while the premise of this book is to 'tell the story of the most central event in Soviet history, the Great Patriotic War, through objects' (p. 3), Schechter has used the history of 'things' to construct an intensely human account of this experience.

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Daniel Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2020. Xiv + 963pp. Maps + Illustrations + Index. ISBN 978-0241249994 (hardback). Price £35.00

Being a west coast of Scotland Presbyterian, I am naturally inclined to approach anything with the whiff of general Establishment approval with some scepticism, and resolved early doors to be firm, fair, and friendly. I have never been influenced by the opinions of so-called "great minds" and have always preferred to plough my own,

oftentimes lonely, furrow. But, happily, I find myself falling in line with the enthusiasm for Todman's "total history" of the Second World War, at least for volume two.

Starting with the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, described by Churchill as "the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history", when around 80,000 British, Indian and Australian soldiers surrendered to a Japanese force roughly half their size, and ending with the early negotiations over the Marshall Plan in 1947, this volume is a political history of wartime. Those looking for a detailed description of military campaigns will be disappointed, arguably that story has been well told many times elsewhere.

Todman's book uses the chronology of the Second World War as the basis for a political analysis from a British perspective. What makes it a particularly attractive record, though, is the analysis provided via the views of the ordinary people of Britain, as well as those of politicians, generals, and civil servants, during those testing times. I found, for example, that the evidence gathered by investigators from the social research organisation Mass Observation, sprinkled liberally through the book, most interesting.

Todman does not, however, explode the national myth of wartime Britain, all pulling together in adversity and putting a collective brave face on the fears and difficulties experienced by most. Rather he explores the depths of the myth, and in many ways such exploration reinforces it. Beneath the image of plucky Britain defying the odds, political rivalries, petty jealousies, ambition, infidelities, crime and laziness continued as it does to this day, but were somehow still subsumed into a national spirit which was something so much greater than the sum of its constituent parts. I found this strangely reassuring.

A theme which runs throughout is Britain's relations with its allies, and that with the USA in particular. It is generally accepted that Britain would not have emerged victorious from the Second World War if it had not been for the efforts of both the Soviet Union and America. The former was, of course, fighting for its very survival, and Britain and the USA supplied their eastern ally with what they could to help sustain its efforts while the west was building up its own military strength and resources.

On the other hand, aid from the USA was hardly selfless and altruistic. There was a hard-nosed edge to American aid to Britain, and it seems to have been approached pragmatically and with care so as never to place the USA at any disadvantage. The Americans were keen not to prop up Britain's ailing colonial empire, whether for reasons of ideology or envy, and they certainly seemed to have attempted to garner economic advantage at every appropriate opportunity.

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This is the enduring theme of Todman's second volume, perhaps; the beginning of the end of the British Empire and the transition of Britain from first class to second class global power. The stresses and strains of the war were too much, and change came fast after its end. And yet, the image of a defiant Britain still shines through its pages, notwithstanding repeated disappointments and disasters. It did indeed keep right on to the end of the road.

I have read elsewhere this book described as "the definitive account" of Britain during the Second World War. That is a bit too far for me, but it's probably one of "the" definitive accounts.

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