

## 'Two World Wars And One World Cup': The Strange Uses of Military History – A Review Essay

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**Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars Against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortions of Hindsight*. Cambridge University Press, 2014, vii + 191pp. ISBN: 978-1-1-07-00471-9. Hardback £54.99. ISBN: 978-1-1-07-65913-1. Paperback £19.99.**

Brian Bond's energy and enthusiasm appears unabated and he is still labouring in his study in his eighties. This book is a worthy addition to his already extensive bibliography. He has also shown remarkable resilience in getting this book to his publisher. During its composition he endured two bouts of serious flooding and many months of unimaginable chaos, and we should be grateful that he has persevered. This book is conceived as 'an exploratory study' which he hopes might 'at least stimulate debate' (p. 7).

Bond's prime target is a deeply ingrained cultural stereotype that has influenced the historiography profoundly but continues to dominate the popular outlook even though modern scholarship has now departed from it in significant ways. Briefly stated, this agreed that the First World War had been fought over nothing in particular, indeed had arisen out of error, and its conduct bungled; the Second, by contrast, proved to be a 'good' war waged for national survival against an evil cause with skill and economy; the Two World Wars, in short, have been placed and remain in antithesis. Bond comments that his objective is not 'to reverse the myth...but rather to argue that both of these stereotypes are flawed and in particular that Britain's role in both wars had been distorted in hindsight' (p.2). The stereotype is also remarkably parochial with 'foreigners having only walk-on parts in the drama' (p.10). The parochial drama provides a source of both self-denunciation, as British generals were uniquely incompetent, and a source of self-congratulation, as British generals were also uniquely gifted – and any errors committed in the West in 1944-45 could be blamed on American blunders. Parochialism is not a unique British fault, as American treatments too exhibit it, but Americans largely ignore the First World War, so it is unusual to place the World Wars in this sharp, antithetical way, as the British tend to do.

Professor Bond has already dealt with British disillusion with 1914-18 in *The Unquiet Western Front* (2002), though his arguments here have a broader impact because of the deeper context. In British cultural life this war has denoted the meaningless nihilism and brutality of war which, it is held, can never achieve anything. Another painful recollection was the growth of an uncomprehending gap that yawned between soldiers and civilians as the latter could never grasp the sufferings of the former amidst their comfortable domesticity. Bond's point is that the Second World War was a conflict of even greater, remorseless attrition and destruction; indeed in 1939-45 it is quite justifiable to speculate that servicemen posted to South Africa, the West Indies or training missions to Canada had a much more 'cushy' time than civilians in London, Coventry, Plymouth and Hull (the last two the most severely damaged of British cities), subject to endless aerial bombardment. The disillusionment with 1914-18 grew over time, returning with greater ferocity during 'the sixties'. Professor Bond attributes this to 'left-wing' writers, and many were indeed socialists who found much to deplore in British social attitudes of 50 years before. But, as he points out, Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (1961) 'most successfully captured the ethos of the time' (p.18).

What is so interesting in the persistence of these attitudes over another 50 years is the role of right-wing neo-isolationist publicists like Simon Heffer in disseminating an identical *pot pourri*. Another, Peter Hitchens in *The Mail on Sunday* (see 16 June 2013), describes 1914-18 as 'our greatest mistake': 'the biggest mistake ever made by British politicians, which is saying something'. The circumstances and the outlook might have changed, but such critics display a vital need to demonstrate the uniquely British incompetence symbolized by 1914, and even more by 1 July 1916, the continuing 'modern obsession' with which Bond finds 'puzzling' (p.129). Bond thus argues for broad similarity rather than contrast between the Two World Wars and details his case in a succession of well-wrought chapters covering, policy, command, fighting methods and combat experience, not forgetting the war in the air and at sea. He demonstrates an ability to explain complex military issues in clear, plain, easily comprehensible language. The book succeeds in compelling the reader to think. Bond also makes his task look easy though he grapples with a multiplicity of factors and every page includes shrewd insights and illuminating asides.

The experience of 1940 left the British reluctant to renew the continental commitment to France without American help. Bond contends that that bred complacency and an unwillingness to consider the lessons of their defeat in France and the Low Countries. They were doomed to re-live the experience again several times in the Mediterranean. The British had little to boast about in their military record by June 1942. The atmosphere in United States service circles of kindness but nonetheless pained tolerance of British military bungling accompanied by a good deal of head-shaking is palpable in American sources during these years – and quite at

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odds with the heroic tone often granted to their efforts in British sources, dealing either with retreats to the beaches or towards Alexandria. Bond demonstrates the importance of British post-war motion pictures in concealing this gloomy record while invariably pointing to the opening of the artillery bombardment at the Second Battle of El Alamein and the 'turning of the tide'. And acceptance of initial defeat could be accommodated in the British military tradition, as it is well known that the British always lose all their battles except the last. Or so they could persuade themselves in the comfortable knowledge that all had turned out well in the end.

Bond sums up with a discussion of the essential reasons why a literature of 'disenchantment' failed to spring up in the immediate post-war years even though arguably the atmosphere was more crisis-laden than in the years 1919-25. Bond does though consider the critics of the Bomber Offensive against Germany which emerged much later and deals severely with them – partly by relating the Strategic Air Offensive to the inability to strike back directly at Germany, which resulted from British military defeats on land. Bond groups his reasons under five broad headings. First, the defeats of 1940-42 were downplayed by emphasizing the Battle of Britain and the triumph of 'the few' which dovetailed neatly with the romantic appeal of noble defiance as Britain stood 'alone'. Secondly, defeated British generals escaped harsh censure, and were even re-employed, like Neil Ritchie, because they were sheltered by the titanic figure of Winston Churchill who had been involved in many of the decisions that had ended in defeat. Thirdly, the British contribution to the ultimate victory was exaggerated by comparison with that of Soviet Russia; such a myopic perspective survived as late as the 1980s, exemplified by Nigel Hamilton's massive three volume authorized life of Montgomery (1981-86). Fourthly, the much smaller casualty bill after a six year war by comparison with the earlier bloodbath over four years could only be welcomed and was of course a cause of celebration; but this was only made possible by the unacknowledged Russian death-grip on the Eastern Front. Lastly, but by no means least, British triumphalism encouraged the widespread view that 'we' won the war. And as John Ramsden has shown in *Don't Mention the War* (2006), this language of the football stadium, 'Two World Wars and One World Cup', has allowed a much later generation born (often long) after 1945 to use latent anti-German sentiment based on scanty knowledge of 1939-45, with the boorish Jeremy Clarkson as its champion, to give a spurious sense of English (not British) 'identity' revolving around international football tournaments as a substitute for war. What Ramsden reveals so interestingly, is that not just one but the two generations who had lived through these Two World Wars did not exhibit such crude exhibitions of anti-German prejudice: the doctors who had worked to save the lives of football players badly injured in the Munich air disaster of 1962 were given the freedom of the city of Manchester to great applause. Mr Clarkson is nonetheless incorrigible in observing of any German car that it exhibits high performance for any 'drive through Poland'. Such are the odd uses to which history might be put.

Professor Bond is not tempted to wander down these polemical paths – and perhaps that is just as well. He keeps his eye on the great issues. I share his view that Britain did not ‘win’ the war. Britain’s greatest achievement lay in remaining undefeated despite many setbacks, in holding the line so that the war could be won in tandem with powers greater than Britain. This is a short book that reflects its author’s revisionist instincts. Brevity might be the soul of wit, as Shakespeare tells us in *Hamlet*, but it conceals the skill of this book’s construction and the deep thought that has been devoted to it.