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# World War II Homefront: A Historiography

In recent years, the World War II homefront has become a fertile field for historical scholarship. For several decades after the war, historians wrote extensively about the New Deal and the Cold War but neglected the wartime homefront. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars began to fill that gap with a number of outstanding comprehensive accounts and many more specialized studies. As the United States celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the war in the 1990s, historians looked at the impact of the war even more closely than before, and we now have a rich collection of scholarship dealing with the entire wartime experience. The following are highlights of that scholarship, dealing with the themes appearing in this issue of the *OAH Magazine of History*, for students and teachers interested in pursuing these issues further.

Two recent books provide the best brief introduction to the war at home. Allan M. Winkler's *Home Front, U.S.A.: America during World War II*, 2d ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2000) deals with the economic, social, and political effects of the struggle and argues that the war was a watershed that laid the framework for the postwar years. John W. Jeffries's *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) likewise offers a clear overview of the changes that occurred but suggests that continuities with the past were equally important and argues that basic American values survived the conflict intact. Both of these books contain full bibliographies of all the recent scholarship.

Other books help fill out the picture. William L. O'Neill's *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1993) offers a good overview of all sides of the struggle. The two best books from the 1970s, still useful today, are Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1972); and John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). Polenberg provides an evenhanded and useful

assessment of the important wartime developments. Blum includes a fuller sense of the culture and its constraints in his more extended account. Two other older works that are likewise still helpful are Richard R. Lingeman, *Don't You Know There's a War On? The American Home Front, 1941-1945* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970); and Geoffrey Perrett, *Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph: The American People, 1939-1945* (New York: Coward, McCann, and Geohegan, 1973). Lee Kennett's *For the Duration: The United States Goes to War, Pearl Harbor-1942* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) published more recently, examines the first six months of the struggle. Anthologies that can be used to supplement the above works include: Richard Polenberg, ed., *America at War: The Home Front, 1941-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Chester E. Eisinger, ed., *The 1940s: Profile of a Nation in Crisis* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969); and the much more recent Mark P. Parillo, ed., *We Were in the Big One: Experiences of the World War II Generation* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002).

On the issue of whether the struggle was a good war, see Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). Paul Fussell paints a much more devastating picture of the impact of the conflict in *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Richard Polenberg, who authored one of the best early analyses of the homefront experience in 1972, returned to the subject twenty years later in "The Good War? A Reappraisal of How World War II Affected American Society" published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 100 (1992). In this latter essay, he focuses less on the positive accomplishments of the struggle and more on the way the war narrowed individual freedom and reinforced conservative tendencies in all areas of American life.

On Franklin D. Roosevelt, such a dominant figure during the war, there is a vast literature. A number of the standard books

about FDR in the early New Deal and war years still give the best sense of the man. To begin, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958); and Schlesinger, *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960). Equally useful are James MacGregor Burns' two volumes, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956); and *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970). The best recent book, which is much more than a biography, is Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994). To fill out the picture with speeches and public statements, see Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, X-XIII* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

Economic policy helped win the war. On war mobilization and the economic changes it brought, an official account that provides a good starting point is the United States Bureau of the Budget, *The United States at War: Development and Administration of the War Program by the Federal Government* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1946). John Morton Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of War, 1941-1945* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967) gives a clear overview of events from the vantage point of the Secretary of the Treasury. Eliot Janeway, *The Struggle for Survival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951) is a still useful description of the governmental effort. Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979) gives a full description of the effects of mobilization on one state, while Robert G. Spinney, *World War II in Nashville: Transformation of the Homefront* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998) provides an assessment of mobilization on one city, and Marc Scott Miller, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) describes the impact on another. For labor issues, see Nelson A. Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Propaganda played an important part in mobilizing the American public for victory. Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978) remains the best introduction to the American propaganda effort. Holly Cowan Shulman's *The Voice of America: Propaganda and Democracy, 1941-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) is an outstanding account of wartime broadcasting activities.

In recent years, there has been a good deal of creative work on the status of women in World War II. The best starting point is William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Since Chafe wrote, a number of other scholars have examined in greater detail shifting work patterns and the related question of social role. Two very useful surveys of women's

wartime experience are Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); and Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982). See also a perceptive study by D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). For women's own voices, two excellent collections that work well in the classroom are Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, eds., *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991); and *American Women in a World at War: Contemporary Accounts from World War II* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997). On the related issue of the war's impact on children, see William M. Tuttle Jr., *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

On women's employment, the best starting points are Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987); and Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). For further study, see Antonette Chambers Noble, "Utah's Rosies: Women in the Utah War Industries during World War II," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 59 (1991); and Paddy Quick, "Rosie the Riveter: Myths and Realities," *Radical America* 9 (1975).

The role of African Americans during World War II has also received a good deal of attention. Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1976) provides a comprehensive overview and is the place to start. Richard M. Dalfiume's article, "The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* 55 (1968) is still essential. Other useful studies include Lee Finkle, *Forum for Protest: The Black Press During World War II* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975); John Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980); and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

For the difficulties of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, the best recent works are Andrew E. Kersten, *Fighting for Fair Employment: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

Wartime racial violence has also come under close scrutiny. Useful works on the riot in Detroit include Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1964); Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D.

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Humphrey, *Race Riot* (New York: Octagon Books, 1943); and Harvard Sitkoff, "The Detroit Race Riot of 1943," *Michigan History* 53 (1969). For a treatment of the Harlem uprising, see Dominic J. Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977).

There have been a number of outstanding treatments of the Japanese American experience during World War II. Roger Daniels provides the best starting point in three different books: *Concentration Camps U.S.A.: Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); *The Decision to Relocate the Japanese Americans* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1975); and *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). John Armor and Peter Wright's *Manzanar* (New York: Times Books, 1988) contains photographs by Ansel Adams and a commentary by John Hersey. Another useful account is Mike Masaoka with Bill Hosokawa, *They Call Me Moses Masaoka: An American Saga* (New York: Morrow, 1987). See also Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1969); and Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow, 1976). For court cases, the best source is Peter Irons, *Justice At War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Images are important in understanding the war. Ronald H. Bailey and the editors of Time-Life Books have done a first-rate job of collecting photographs in *The Home Front: U.S.A.* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1977). William L. Bird Jr. and

Harry Rubenstein, *Design for Victory: World War II Posters on the American Home Front* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998) is an outstanding collection of wartime posters. Stan Cohen, *V for Victory: America's Home Front during World War II* (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1991) is another good compilation of wartime images.

Oral history, likewise, can give a feeling for the period. Studs Terkel, *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); and Mark Jonathan Harris, Franklin D. Mitchell, and Steven J. Schechter, *The Homefront: America during World War II* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984) are especially useful in this area.

Fiction, likewise, tells us a good deal about the war. Harriette Arnow's moving novel *The Dollmaker* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954) vividly conveys the crowded conditions and human difficulties in wartime Detroit. Allan M. Winkler's novel for young adults, *Cassie's War* (Unionville, NY: Royal Fireworks Press, 1994) describes the war at home through the eyes of a young girl, and is appropriate for classroom use. □

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