

***Allies in War:
Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945***
Roundtable Review



Reviewed Works:

Mark Stoler. *Allies in War: Britain and America against the Axis Powers, 1940-1945.* New York: Oxford University Press, February 2006. 318 pp. \$39.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-3407-2026-4 (hardcover); 978-0-3407-2027-1 (paperback).

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My students are often surprised to learn that in all its major conflicts since 1900, the United States fought alongside allies or as part of a coalition. This means that, to be accurate and meaningful, any serious written work (or lecture) on U.S. military or diplomatic history covering one of these major conflicts cannot simply be the bilateral tale of the U.S. and its principal opponent. Instead, it must be an account that factors in the allies, the enemies, and the neutrals (as well as the internal, domestic affairs of course). But herein lies a paradox. To incorporate all of the parts, even in a relatively narrow, focused work, requires mastery of an ever growing amount of primary source material and secondary literature, not all of it in English. No single scholar can seriously hope to master all of this material and produce an entirely complete work. The historian must balance objectives against resources, ends against means. Tradeoffs, sacrifices, and compromises must occur. There must be, in effect, a grand strategy for conducting research and producing sophisticated scholarship.

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Mark Stoler's *Allies in War* is an excellent example of this balancing. It is not the definitive account of World War Two in its entirety. It is far shorter, for instance, than Gerhard Weinberg's monumental tome *A World at Arms*, another important and encompassing work. Yet is more ambitious than Christopher Thorne's *Allies of a Kind*. Thorne's work focuses on Anglo-American relations only in East Asia and the Pacific. Instead, it is more like the larger cousin of Waldo Heinrichs's *Threshold of War*.¹ At once short and ambitious, *Allies in War* is certainly no less important. Stoler has synthesized a career's worth of research and reading, and the accumulated work of two generations worth of scholars, to craft a smooth narrative account of World War Two from the perspective of the cooperation between the United States and Great Britain, two of the major allies in the war, in all theaters of combat.² Proliferating superlatives aside, this actually is a major accomplishment.

¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Christopher Thorne, *Allies of a Kind: the United States, Britain and the war against Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Waldo H. Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

² Mark A. Stoler's previous works on the subject include, *inter alia*, *The Politics of the Second Front: American Military Planning and Diplomacy in Coalition Warfare, 1941-1943* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,

The resulting book is a simultaneous military and diplomatic account of the war that gently embraces Stoler's embedded coalition story. In 230 pages, he succeeds in explaining to the reader the general evolution of military technology as well as the nature of combat at sea, in the air and on land, in a crisp way. The story is, of course, a familiar one, and those who have followed the recent and standard literature will see that he has incorporated from both primary sources as well as synthetic, analytic accounts such as Richard Overy's *Why the Allies Won*.³ While there are few surprises, there are some eyebrow-raising details that moves the narrative along and rewards the reader (the story of the sawdust-ice combination known as Pykrete and a service pistol in one Combined Chiefs of Staff conference comes to mind). What makes Stoler's account stand out is how well he has blended a phenomenal quantity of material together without losing sight of his coalition tale. He does this through a top-level account. Stoler rarely mentions units or commanders below the corps level. He clearly lays out the major operational and strategic level developments, so that even novice readers will come away with an understanding of just where and how the war occurred. When talking about the evolution of the combined Anglo-American forces in the European theater, he pays close attention to who was in command and when. Some might denigrate this as particularism, but it significantly strengthens the larger argument. The fact that the United States and the United Kingdom came to share command in Europe in innovative ways—ultimately trusting their soldiers to one another—is important to Stoler, who by describing the evolution of command arrangements illustrates just how tightly the coalition came together at the very highest levels. It was, to borrow from the World War I controversy about injecting U.S. soldiers into British and French divisions, amalgamation of a very different sort. General Dwight D. Eisenhower is the hero here, pursuing, as Stoler describes it, the “creation of an unprecedented headquarters whose members acted as if they belonged to a single nation.” [p. 76] So as a military overview the work is excellent, particularly for nonspecialists.

At the same time, the work is a diplomatic analysis of how the alliance rose and fell. Stoler starts with the pre-war relationships and, echoing Waldo Heinrichs, shows in the first chapters how growing simultaneous concerns about Europe and Asia brought the two countries together in 1940 and 1941. From the beginning the U.S. was very much the junior partner, militarily inexperienced and not yet mobilized fully for war. But through the careful explanation of the successive wartime conferences, Stoler crafts a parallel narrative to the larger war story that illustrates how the alliance transformed. Slowly the U.S. gained strength over the British. Steadily the military commanders learned how to compromise not only with one another but with the political leadership. Eventually all become confident—too confident at times—that the war was going their way and so had to balance postwar desires against wartime requirements. This is the real meat of the work,

1977), *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century* (Twayne, 1989), and *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance and U.S. Strategy in World War II*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

³ Richard J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

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and it shows clearly the extent to which historians examining wars must understand how tightly interrelated coalition politics, diplomacy, and wartime strategy really are.

Stoler does not leave out the enemies, the other allies, or the lesser theaters. He explicitly points out at the beginning that readers should understand both the significance of the German-Soviet struggle on the Eastern Front (something so important that Evan Mawdsley has written a separate volume in the same series) and the overriding fact that the U.S. and Great Britain did not by themselves win either the war in Europe or Asia. He goes on to explain other significant elements, such as the role of the Chinese in tying down more than half of the Japanese army on the mainland, at least until 1944, and spends considerable time explaining the particulars of the Chinese theater and the KMT-Communist rivalry. The French, the Poles, the Australians, and the Italians all receive their mention, however brief, where it best fit into the narrative. The account of the China-Burma-India theater, something often set aside in other works, reminds the reader that while it was a secondary concern, it was nonetheless there and placed its own constant demand for resources and attention. Neither in Europe nor the Pacific, the CBI still mattered.

But it is this parallel attention to both the war story and the coalition story that raised what seemed to me to be a fundamental problem with the work, one that plagues all such ambitious encompassing works. In the race to mention everything of significance, what must be left out? Where are the holes in the story, the parts that we still do not understand correctly? Was it worth, for example, including extensive discussions on the internal Chinese politics during the war when that would necessarily allow less attention to the coalition story? As I read the work, I began to make notations in the margin whenever I thought Stoler omitted a part of the narrative that should have been there. Most of these details he came to eventually, deftly and several pages later, but I began to wonder whether his concision reflected such a deep understanding of the subject that he could control the story all the way to the end, or whether there were elisions over unclear subjects that scholars still do not fully understand.

Let me offer several specific examples. First, the spectacular story of the 1944 landing craft shortage allows Stoler to illustrate how the U.S. used this to gain leverage over the British both in the Mediterranean and in the Far East (and how everyone used it to rein in Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Rhodesian fantasies). But we see little specific discussion of how the evolving industrial, financial and manpower limitations of both the U.S. and Great Britain shaped these grand strategic choices. It is clear Britain faced constraints, but the U.S. comes across as this unstoppable force with an ever growing army. The Germans were sinking massive quantities of shipping in the North Atlantic, but we do not have a sense of what Britain's real breaking point could have been or how close they really were. Second, and relatedly, we have little discussion beyond a chapter on the naval war about the logistics and resourcing of the war. How well did the two cooperate on this front? Beyond the Atlantic convoys, what compromises did the two work out if shipping was scarce? Did the British worry about U.S. air corridors across Africa or shipping lines into the Middle East possibly leading to postwar economic relationships at British expense? Third, we are told relatively little (beyond the Darlan affair or the early Pacific operations, for example)

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about the limitations that domestic politics placed on either ally over coalition matters. Was this because it rarely affected things, or because there simply was no room in the work to discuss this? Finally, what is there that we do not still understand? If the pre-1970s accounts of the war are now fundamentally flawed because of the ULTRA revelation, what else is out there that could be wrong? Stoler concedes that as he went along in the project he learned just how much he did not know about the conflict--but what is there that we do not know to look for? He could not have put everything into this account, so these questions could well be unfair ones to ask, but we should ask them nonetheless.

In the end, though, such quibbles should not overshadow the fact that this is an important book. Stoler is fair and judicious when dealing with controversial subjects (the Yalta accords or the decision to use the atomic bombs, for instance) and manifests no noticeable slant (aside from increasingly sharp illustrations of Winston Churchill's fervent imagination that eventually wore out even President Franklin D. Roosevelt's patience) that would impede the book's use in the classroom even to the War College level. As an updated narrative account of World War II, it certainly reflects the remarkable strides that the field has made in recent years. As an analysis of the intricacies of the Anglo-American relationship during the war, it is eminently useful. One comes away with precisely what Stoler set out to do create -- a clear sense of just how immensely difficult this entire effort at coalition warfare really was. Indeed, we should wonder not why the Axis lost or the Allies won, but rather how on earth the major actors in this ever kept their stamina up for the duration of this exhausting conflict.

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