A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II by Gerhard L. Weinberg

This comprehensive examination of the Second World War looks at grand strategy and diplomacy, as opposed to the gritty details of the combat experience. A World at Arms is written in a matter-of-fact tone, so don't expect a poetic narrative. Despite this, no other historian has presented such a sweeping overview. Weinberg performs the important task of reminding his readers in the West that much of the fighting—and perhaps the most decisive parts—was done in the East, between the Germans and the Russians. American readers, for their part, may appreciate Weinberg's treatment of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who is portrayed as a courageous wartime leader. This book is an essential part of any library on the Second World War.

My Personal Review:
One Big History of the World War
I have been reading books about the World War for nearly 50 years. This book is one of a kind. But its not written for everyone. First I will point out some limitations of this book. Then I will list some of the strengths that make this book unique.

Limitations.
Weinberg is a clear writer, but not flashy. The material is carefully organized but it moves at a deliberate pace. Put simply, this is not exciting reading, especially at 900 pages! If you loved Ambrose, McCullough, or DEste, you may dislike Weinberg. Weinberg believes in a form of historical writing that downplays the role of individuals. Roosevelt, Hitler, Stalin, Rommel, Churchill, Mussolini, Chang Kai Shek, Hirohito are all in attendance, but their personalities, their quirks, and their habits, hardly enter into the story. Instead, these men represent movements, states, ideologies, etc.

Weinberg never uses direct, pithy quotes. That takes something out, compared to other popular history.
Weinberg doesn’t say anything he can’t back up. Many chapters contain 200 footnotes or more. Those footnotes could drive you crazy.

Weinberg does not present the War as simply a clash of Good versus Evil. He sees a much more complex picture of motives and actions at play. Few parties to the conflict emerge with their honor wholly intact.

Weinberg does not write much about leaders, battles, etc. Don’t get me wrong. The leaders and battles are there, but W is only interested in the big picture aspects of battles, not in leaders, heroes, clever tactics, etc.

I don’t see these limitations as very important. A reader can get all that exciting stuff from popular books. Instead, Weinberg has produced a book that mainly appeals to World War addicts and scholars. I’m not sure I would recommend this book to readers who don’t already have a good general grasp of the War.

Now the strengths:

Weinberg organized his material in such a way as to show the War in an integrated whole. He covers the whole World, Asia, Europe, Mediterranean, even Africa and South America. In doing so he shows many interconnections that I had never previously considered. For instance, the book shows the close relationship between Japan and Germany.

His writing is very tight. He discusses his topics systematically, thoroughly, and logically. He likes to set out lists of considerations, or reasons that I find illuminating.

For example, why did Hitler consistently reject offers of additional collaboration from Vichy France?

Weinberg is realistic in his judgments. Although his overall viewpoint about the morality of the War is rather conventional, he’s unafraid of making harsh judgments. For instance, W shows how the neutrals; Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, etc acted in greedy and self-interested ways, looking for war profits, wanting territorial gains, desperate to keep their independence.

W is not given to moralizing. As I stated, his own views are clear, not hidden. But he does NOT find many instances where moral or ethical considerations carried much weight with the combatants or occupied nations. He’s a believer in RealPolitik like Kissinger.

W is not a military man, but he’s writing about military operations. His grasp of those operations is satisfactory, although he must avoid details. He’s excellent at showing how military operations relate to the larger war situation. For example, he shows how Germany sent 200,000 troops to Tunisia just when Germany needed them more at Stalingrad.

Weinberg reaches some controversial conclusions about perennial hot issues:

· Most Germans supported Hitler straight through. It’s not realistic to talk about a German resistance.

· Many adult Germans knew enough about the treatment of Jews, captives, and slave labor to understand the horrific nature of their government. They acquiesced.
Hitlers overall plans for the future of Europe were much more radical than most people understand -- even today.

With a few exceptions, populations in the occupied countries did not mount serious resistance efforts. They willingly collaborated. (ex. Yugoslavia, Poland, USSR).

The Wehrmacht knew fully about the Jews, the slave labor, the crimes against occupied countries. Its no good to argue that we didnt know.

The Western Allies knew about the Genocide by 1942. They did not act because there was little they could do, and, in the US especially, the government did not want to get into a political situation where the opposition could label it A War to Save Jews. Anti-Semitism was still strong in US.

etc etc etc.

To sum up, this book represents a terrific achievement. It represents a huge body of research. He must have taken 10 years to write it, with the help of 10 assistants. None of the other books to take on the Whole Enchilada come close. It will probably stand as the standard treatment for 50 years, until many more closed archives are finally opened.

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