



The Second World War: A Marxist History by Chris Bambery.

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Descriptors are tricky. Historians and political scientists have applied terms like “fiscal-military state,” “kleptocracy,” “fascist state,” and “social democracy” to various nations at various times, without much concern for the normative and intellectual basis for their use. In his Marxist history of World War II, writer, broadcaster, and activist Chris Bambery describes the United States, the United Kingdom, and France as capitalist-imperialist states without establishing whether that designation is correct, merely controversial, or essential to his understanding of the war. Instead, he simply assumes his description is factual and moves on to make his larger argument.

Bambery maintains that expansionist fascism was a byproduct of American, British, and French attempts after the 1929 Crash to create closed domestic, hemispheric (in the case of the United States), and imperial (in the case of Britain and France) markets to protect what was left of their economies. This “circling the wagons” mentality left out weaker rivals like Germany, Italy, and Japan, which lacked the resources and market depth enjoyed in the dollar and pound sterling zones. Therefore, elites in these nations turned to military aggrandizement as the only solution to their economic bind; fascism was the political and social manifestation of this combination of autarky and expansion, and the best way to survive the intercapitalist competition let loose by the Great Depression.

Although far from the total picture, Bambery’s argument to this point is at least plausible. But he starts to go wrong in depicting the Second World War as “different” because it “threatened the rights and liberties of the working classes and much of the peasantry” (9) throughout the world. This is true, as far as it goes, but what Bambery does not acknowledge is that the war threatened the rights and liberties of many American, British, and French capitalists and bourgeois as well. Instead, he descends to caricaturing Chamberlain-era Britain: “anti-communism and fear of revolution in the mid-1930s blinded them [the British governing elite] to the principal threat to their imperial standing” (20). This grossly underestimates the fear and apprehension National Socialist Germany and Imperial Japan instilled in British elites. Bambery also confuses appeasement with sympathy. The record shows that very few British politicians were in fact sympathetic to the fascist states. Nor is the author’s portrayal of France as tottering on the brink of social dissolution borne out by recent scholarship.

If the governing elites in the capitalist-imperialist states (and, interestingly, Joseph Stalin’s USSR) were guilty of failing to “stand up” to fascism, the heroes of Bambery’s story are the Soviet people, the anti-fascist resistance movements, and the working people of all nations who, he writes, realized that (and why) fascism was evil and risked their lives to eradicate it. Again, a solid case can be made for the centrality of the Soviet citizenry in the downfall of fascism. But the details and intricacies of that case are lost in Bambery’s telling of the tale.

In the end, the author maintains World War II was a contest among imperialist powers won by anti-fascist workers and peasants. Hence, he sharply discriminates between the motives and goals of the (venal) leaders and those of the (noble) people. In this regard, Bambery’s argument evokes the “citizen-soldier/greatest generation” mythos so beloved in American popular accounts of World War II (think Steven Ambrose, Ken Burns, and their emulators), though the latter stress the nation, not class.

Both champion the solidarity of “ordinary” people coming together to fight a great evil that would “enslave” them—those nasty fascists. This inspiring story is designed to instill a message about the past, the present, and the future. The difference lies in how the heroes are defined and where they come (or do not come) from.

Bambery sees World War II as a potentially revolutionary moment for heroic workers and peasants. Revolutions against the existing political order, be it capitalist-imperialist or Stalinist, failed to materialize or were strangled at birth. The ability of governing elites to channel the ire and energies of all those workers and peasants into the war effort distracts us from those whose actions really counted: it was the soldiers and the workers, Bambery insists, not the politicians and the generals, who got the job done. But the lack of organization at the grass roots robbed workers and peasants of the chance to turn the war against fascism into a struggle for human liberation. At least that is how Bambery sees it. This argument will always remain an unprovable counterfactual, however one may perceive the author’s revolutionary agenda.

As history, Chris Bambery’s book is no more misleading than many installments in the “Good War” literature: it has a patent bias, ignores counterexamples and messy ambiguities, and delivers a clear message. For a more balanced and nuanced Marxist take on World War II, one must still turn to Eric Hobsbawm’s classic *Age of Extremes*.¹

1. Subtitle: *A History of the World, 1914–1991* (NY: Pantheon, 1995).