

INTRODUCTION

NO NATION UNTOUCHED

Looking back from the vantage point of a new millennium, it's clear that no other event of the 20th century was as momentous – or as horrendous – as World War II.

World War I came close, but it was primarily a European conflict into which the United States entered late in the game. This is not to minimize the terrible destruction wrought during that period – millions died as a result of combat, destruction, and disease – but World War I was not a “world war” in the complete sense that World War II was.

Indeed, World War II involved nearly every nation on every livable continent. Many countries, such as England and Russia, were fighting for their very existence against the military might of a fanatical madman hellbent on global domination. But even those lands not directly involved in the fighting felt the war's influence. At the height of the conflict, virtually no nation was left untouched.

Officially beginning in 1939 with Germany's invasion of Poland and ending six years later with most of Europe and much of the rest of the world in crumbling chaos, World War II proved to be, in terms of lives lost and cities destroyed, the most devastating conflict in human history. When the big guns ceased and the smoke cleared, freedom proved victorious over dictatorial rule, but the world as we knew it would never be the same.

Much as been written and said about World War II since its official conclusion with Japan's formal surrender on September 3, 1945, yet the war, its goal, and the stories of the men and women who fought it grow dimmer with each passing year. Two generations have grown up in its shadow, with each becoming more distant and uninterested. World War II was something our grandfathers fought in, say young people today – it's a long-ago conflict that no longer has any meaning.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. World War II literally defined an entire generation. It was the last “good war,” unclouded by conflicting ideology or uncertain public opinion. Everything all free countries now hold dear can be traced back to those tumultuous six years.

In the grand scheme, World War II was the ultimate battle between good and evil, with the fate of the world hanging in the balance. It demonstrated the entire range of human emotion, from the depth of man's raw brutality against his fellow man to the courage and dedication that comes with fighting for what one truly believes in.

It has been estimated that more than 22 million military personnel and civilians died worldwide over the course of World War II, and that another 34,400,000 were wounded. Of those numbers, more than 408,000 deaths were American servicemen killed in combat or from other causes.

It is to them – and to all of the military personnel worldwide who fought so valiantly against tyranny and hate – that this book is dedicated.