

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of Andrew Pettegree, *The Book at War: How Reading Shaped Conflict and Conflict Shaped Reading*

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The Book at War: How Reading Shaped Conflict and Conflict Shaped Reading. By Andrew Pettegree. New York: Basic, 2023. 480 pages.

Complex and comprehensive, Andrew Pettegree's *The Book at War* posits a serious study of the social, cultural, and political exigencies that made objects of print—and the people working with them—essential instruments of warfare in the twentieth century. With World War II as his focus, Pettegree argues that books, a term that encompasses numerous kinds of printed materials, were strategically utilized by both the Allies and Axis powers, playing a critical role in defining the outcomes of the Second World War and, consequently, were redefined by those same outcomes. To arrive at this nexus of ideas, he looks back to the nineteenth century to chronicle how books served as vehicles of “ideological conditioning” before slowly evolving into integral parts of each nation's military operations by the start of World War II. Undoubtedly, *The Book at War* audaciously examines the nuanced relationship between the “panoply of print” and military conflicts spanning centuries.¹ Pettegree juggles the combat histories of multiple countries, discussing the political implications of their various wars, and analyzing the cultural locations of printed materials amidst these conflicts, which culminates in an extensive examination of book's numerous roles within military operations. His audacity results in an incisive study that cogently illuminates the book's central role in shaping—and being shaped by—World War II.

Rather than focus on the printed word's impact on collective memory, as numerous studies in the field are wont to do, Pettegree focuses on how print explicitly impacted that war itself. He elucidates the pivotal role that

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¹ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 4.

books played in many of the belligerent nations' foreign affairs policies and positions, strategic meetings and decisions, combat operations and battles, and developments in intel and weapons technology that defined wars, broadly speaking, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but especially the Second World War from 1939 to 1945. His approach imbues an ominous gravity to the printed word. Undermining the "assumption that literature is inherently peaceful," he situates books as powerful weapons that helped turn the tide of World War II.²

Pettegree's supporting arguments illustrate how military personnel and soldiers employed books as armaments in a variety of ways. The most immediate use was that of self-defense; books provided protection from opposing militaries as well as the feelings of doubt and fear that crept up amidst the harrowing conflict. Pettegree cites literature as a form of intelligence for governments "fighting a war in a part of the world about which it knew very little" or morale boosting for soldiers who viewed books as a "tangible reminder of life away from the danger."³ He traverses unfamiliar terrain by considering the symbolic implications of maps. While the cartographical documents made armies more efficient, they also "helped reduce the feelings of abandonment and spatial disorientation" among soldiers incarcerated in foreign war camps.⁴ Maps helped soldiers orient themselves against feelings of despair and hopelessness, constantly reminding them that they were not lost. They proved similarly effective on the home front. British and U.S. mapmakers circulated updated charts that illustrated the extent of German Occupied Territory to cajole civilians out of apathy. In response, they felt compelled to support their nation's efforts against the looming shadow of fascism.

Disarming opposing nations of their print resources was also paramount during World War II. He details how Allied and Axis powers intentionally targeted institutions housing a nation's most coveted works of scholarship and literature. By the zenith of the World War II, German scientists conducted groundbreaking rocket research, which they safeguarded from academics and officials affiliated with opposing belligerents. The alarming prospect of a weapons advancement of this magnitude "required the systematic attention of the Allied air forces."⁵ Subsequently, they eviscerated thousands of volumes of research in the bombing of the Berlin Technical University. Pettegree also documents that "Allied bombings of Japan in the last years of the war accounted for half of the country's total book stock."⁶

² Pettegree, *Book at War*, 18, 222.

³ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 18, 222.

⁴ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 144.

⁵ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 90.

⁶ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 343.

Pragmatic as these efforts were, they served a socio-political function, too. The loss of public collections and academic journals was “a demonstration of vulnerability and a tangible blow to morale.”⁷ For a nation to lose their most coveted books was to lose a major part of their cultural identity which, in turn, rattled their people’s convictions to the war. Beyond artillery fire, Pettegree also addresses how bookish people—those whose professional lives revolved around books—played a pivotal role in disarming nations of the tools necessary to advance their fronts. While he does discuss Alan Turing, the British researcher celebrated for decoding Germany’s Enigma machine, he branches out to consider how theorists and scientists on all sides of the conflict employed their analytical skills to contribute to their nations’ efforts. The U.S. enlisted college lecturers and postgraduates in the Research and Analysis Division of the Office of Strategic Studies, where they wrote thousands of handbooks on foreign nations that helped the military plan and execute their attacks. Among the Axis, the Germans boasted a talented cadre of cryptographers who swiftly read British and Russian code traffic, allowing them to pre-emptively thwart Allied operations.

And while the Allies eventually emerged victorious, the path to the end of WWII was riddled with casualties. The weapons of the war physically disabled soldier’s bodies or compromised their mental health, thereby altering their lives upon demobilization. Pettegree applies this same logic to the book at war; its use as a critical weapon affected the literary afterlives of the print industry and culture. In some cases, these changes took place as World War II was unfolding. With the German publishing industry crushed by bombings, British publishing houses thrived, becoming a leader in the publishing industry via Allen Lane’s Penguin Books, a start-up that specialized in paperbacks and, via their imprint Pelican, short political commentaries. Penguin’s success was something of an exception, though. Pettegree shows that the material demands of World War II “created a particularly adverse climate for building library stock.”⁸ V-Day further shaped the content of books. The defeat of the Axis likewise signaled the defeat of Axis ideology, and “if Germany were to be saved [from Nazism], a whole generation of school textbooks would have to be swept away.”⁹ To fulfill this rescue plan, Russia, France, the U.S., and the U.K. curated the curricula and book stock of Germany in addition to circulating their own guidelines outlining select texts that their respective libraries might adopt with caution if not exclude entirely. In this way, the book’s weaponization framed the narrative of global power dynamics following World War II, which

⁷ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 328-29.

⁸ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 177.

⁹ Pettegree, *Book at War*, 351.

underwent another revision during the Cold War as former allies in the U.S. and the Soviet Union again relied on the printed word to wage a decades-long proxy war between the Eastern and Western Blocs.¹⁰

Of course, Pettegree's *The Book at War* far exceeds the ideas discussed here. Pushing 500 pages, his study leaves few if any modes of the book during World War II unaddressed: he details the propaganda pamphlets dropped on opposing armies, the contributions of libraries to frontline and recovery operations, and the cultural legacy of book plundering carried out largely by the High Command of the German Armed Forces among the weaponization of other printed materials. This overwhelming level of detail, however, is sometimes the book's downfall. While Pettegree neatly arranges his study according to clear themes, the presentation within those sections is less clear. Throughout early portions of the book, he oscillates between the timelines and historical wars of numerous countries with a level of precision that is impressive but tedious.

The timely quality to *The Book at War*, however, trumps these minor hindrances. As the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts rage on, books—that broad term Pettegree employs to denote a range of text—take on an even greater significance in the digital age. With the news being rapidly published on the internet and social media platforms, the sheer amount of print available is intimidating. Moreover, it is exacerbated by the proliferation of misinformation and artificial intelligence, which can deceive readers with a level of sophistication never before seen. The ensuing feelings of hopelessness, confusion, and disorientation are sentiments that military chaplains are likely familiar with in their work. Pettegree's book, then, might be a useful tool, illustrating how books, in all forms, can combat those feelings—and even the misinformation creating them—in times of uncertainty and harrowing conflict. Something as simple as a book recommendation might be just enough to shine a light in the darkness, restoring faith that can be so easily lost in the chaos of our contemporary moment. After all, such was the case for many soldiers fighting on the frontlines, recovering in hospitals, or interned in prison camps during World War II.

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¹⁰ As other reviews have already critiqued, Pettegree's discussion on the aftermath of World War II falls short of considering how postwar print culture rewrote the belligerent nations' identities. See Katherine Voyles's review: "What Role does the Book Play in War?" *Inkstick*, July 19, 2024 <https://inkstickmedia.com/what-role-does-the-book-play-in-war/>.