

Prof. Stefan Ihrig

student meetings by appointment stefan.ihrig@googlemail.com

Wednesdays, 16:00-20:00

A History of World War II

This course will offer an in-depth look at World War II and how it played out in Europe. It will combine military history with political and social aspects of the war. The course seeks to offer a comprehensive picture of a conflict that claimed the lives of tens of millions of people. It will do so by analyzing different perceptions, levels, and layers of the conflict. The course will also touch upon questions of remembrance, justice, and portrayals in popular culture. Furthermore, by including recently discovered footage and other sources from the time, it is hoped that this course will challenge existing trends that put this conflict into a very distant and removed past. This course will open up important perspectives on the Holocaust.

What you will have to do

Besides coming with an open mind and developing your own interests, you will have to do three main things: 1) read and participate, 2) three special tasks (comments on documentary clips, split reading (team project), devil's advocate (team project), 3) write a final paper (around eight pages long).

Reading

Extensive reading is a must for a history course. The core texts will be available on the course's Moodle platform as pdfs. You are required to read two books in full – both relatively short and essential for this course; various chapters from these books are included in the weekly reading assignments anyway (the books are by Richard Overy and Norman Stone and are listed in the reading list, under essentials, a few pages down, in this syllabus). We will have special reading & project weeks to help you catch up.

Project I: Comments on Documentary

In most of the weeks, there will be clips from a documentary as part of the (student) preparation. Documentaries are important tools when it comes to popularizing knowledge. However, by the very nature of the medium, there will be things that are unduly 'dumbed down', i.e. reduced to certain core meanings and messages, wrongly contextualized, and so on. There is also, as in every medium, the question about which aspect of the topic will be featured and for how much of the space available. Sometimes, of course, documentaries also get the basics wrong. Sometimes, they do a magnificent job in presenting the topic.

It will be your job, for one of the weeks, to give us an idea about the good and the bad of the assigned documentary clips. You each need to come up with three points of commentary –

perhaps a point or two about what you thought was wrong, too ambiguous, or misleading, perhaps another about a factual error. We will discuss these at the beginning of the given session as an entry point to the debate. The clips/weeks will be assigned in the first session.

Project II: Soldaten reading

Sign up to a chapter of the *Soldaten* (soldiers) book of week 10. Read it ahead of time and then discuss with the other assigned colleagues in your team. In the session on *Soldaten*, you – meaning your team – will be tasked to present your chapter (3 minutes) and give some insight as to how convincing you found it or how interesting (or not) it was (2 minutes). Please rehearse and time your presentation/talk.

Project III: Devil's advocate

History is often controversial. Debates about certain topics can continue for dozens of years. Sometimes, debates come back after we thought them long resolved. Additionally, as time moves on, history is often reduced to certain 'iconic' events and places. This means that important topics are often reduced to almost 'automatic' meaning and interpretation. But as students of history, we have to be more critical to understand what often highly complex circumstances and chains of events are.

We will feature a series of debates, fought out by you (in teams). The core of each will be two opposing statements – pro and con. Each side will consist of two or three students who will work together and then present their side. Each side gets 8 minutes maximum (make sure to rehearse and time). All of us will vote on which side we thought was more convincing.

It is called 'devil's advocate' because you will have to argue a case that you do not necessarily agree with. For example, we will need to have teams arguing the significance of the decision to wage an all-out battle for Stalingrad. One side will have to argue that yes, Stalingrad would have been a major symbolic victory for the Germans, worth all that it cost. The other side has to argue the opposite. You may find yourself on the 'wrong' side of the argument – but that is part of the project as well. Please rehearse and time.

The topics are to be found in this syllabus and you can sign up on Moodle for them.

Final paper

Your final assignment in the course is to write a short paper on your thoughts on *Why the Allies won the war*. This assignment accounts for approx. 70% of the final grade (in case you write a referat or seminar paper these factor in at a higher rate).

In the final paper (Why the Allies won?) the student is expected to draw on the debates during the class as well as her/his/their reading of the texts for the class. Think of it like an ongoing assignment, something like the student's research 'diary' of the course (but one that will need to be edited into shape). The paper can take a comprehensive approach, i.e. looking at all the factors, or can zoom in on one or a few (but should then also make clear that there were other factors that were important as well).

Not much additional reading and work should be necessary, but may be required, depending on your argument, and is, in any case, welcome.

Be sure to find a coherent overall approach and argument – do not just string together bits and pieces of information and argument.

The paper should be between five to eight pages long (font size 12, one-and-a-half spacing, 2,5 cm margins all around). Use available proofreading tools – built-in in Word or additional tools such as Grammarly – to produce a perfect or at least near-perfect text. Sloppiness – in language, formatting, or argumentation – will lead to grade reductions.

* Important: familiarize yourself with what **plagiarism** is. Plagiarism, if detected, can have grave consequences. It is seen as a conscious choice to cheat and to deceive. The university employs software to detect plagiarism. Similarly, it is expected that the students write the paper themselves, not have AI write it for them. Spot checks will be carried out with AI programs to see if the text was AI-authored or not. Feel free to use AI-powered programs to improve your writing style, though. The final product, however, must be yours and yours alone.

Upload your paper via Moodle (bottom of page) by the first week of Semester B. (Save your paper as a pdf, make sure you have a title page as well as page numbers). Late submissions will be subject to automatic grade reductions (and at some point, not be accepted, leading to a failed course).

Grading

Your various projects and your participation in the course will count for 30% of the final grade. Your final paper for the other 70%.

If you chose to write a referat or a seminar paper for this course, contact me during this course so that we have a chance to discuss the hows and whys in a timely fashion. If you have a topic that interests you early on, I will be able to give you the necessary advice on the spot; no need to drag this out too much. And why not start the reading for the additional paper while you still have a course on the very same subject.

The referat/seminar paper is then additional to the above-mentioned requirements, projects, and the final paper. The referat or seminar has to be handed in by the last day of Semester B.

If for any reason you have been granted an extension, do not expect that your papers will be graded immediately. Grading will take place timely after the submission deadline at the beginning of Semester B as well as immediately after the end of that semester. The next grading cycle begins at the beginning of the next Semester A. Plan accordingly.

essential reading

(to be read in total, on moodle)

Norman Stone, *World War II – A Short History* (London: Penguin, 2014).

Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 2006 [1995]).

further key texts

Richard Overy, *Russia's War, 1941-1945* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1997]).

Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012).

Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms – A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

further suggested reading

Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London: Penguin, 2017 [1998]).

Antony Beevor, *Arnhem – The Battle for the Bridges* (London: Viking, 2018).

Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat – A History of World War II* (London: Harper Press, 2010).

Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War, 1939-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices – Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941* (London: Penguin, 2008).

Soenke Neitzel & Harald Welzer, *Soldaten on Fighting, Killing and Dying – The Secret Second World War Tapes of German POWs* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

Andrew Roberts, *The Storm of War – A New History of the Second World War* (London: Penguin, 2010).

Nicolas Stargard, *The German War – A Nation Under Arms, 1939-45* (London: Vintage, 2015).

Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction – The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin, 2007).

Weekly topics, reading assignments, and meeting schedule

Week 1: Introduction

18 October 2023

- 1) watch the lecture video clip
- 2) meet in person (or zoom) to discuss at 14:15.

assignments: make sure you have signed up for all the various projects and assignments.

no assigned reading (start reading ahead)

Week 2: Hitler's world (view) and Nazi Germany

25 October 2023

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Stone, *World War II*, ch. 1;

Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, ch. 7/1 (612-637).

Week 3: project and reading week

1 November 2023

** get ahead with your reading and projects (contact me if you need assistance)*

Week 4: Revisionism and appeasement

8 November 2023

- 1) read the text
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, ch. 7/2-4 (638-712).

Week 5: Poland and the war in the West

15 November 2023

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Weinberg, *A World at Arms*, ch. 2;

Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, ch. 1/1, 2/1, 2/2.

Week 6: Barbarossa and beyond

22 November 2023

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Overy, *Russia's War*, ch. 3 & 4;

Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, ch. 3.

Week 7: special lecture and discussion: Hitler's Generals

29 November 2023

no reading required

Week 8: Homefront and bombing war

6 December 2023

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, chapters 2, 4, 6, 8.

Week 9: project and reading week

13 December 2023

** get ahead with your reading and projects (contact me if you need assistance)*

Week 10: Einsatzgruppen, SS, and Wehrmacht

20 December 2023

- 1) read your text & produce and upload your clip with your team
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Neitzel & Welzer, *Soldaten*, various chapters (sign up on moodle)

Week 11: Reversal I

27 December 2023

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Overy, *Russia's War*, chapters 7 & 8.

Week 12: Reversal II

3 January 2024

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Weinberg, chapters 12 & 13.

Week 13: Ending the war

10 January 2024

- 1) read the texts
- 2) watch the lecture video clip
- 3) watch the documentary clip
- 4) meet us to discuss at 14:15.

reading

Weinberg, chapters 14 & 15

Devil's advocate topics

I. Appeasement: *Had France and Britain stopped Hitler right at the beginning, he wouldn't have been able to start a world war and conquer most of Europe*

for the session on 8 November 2023: Revisionism and appeasement

II. Blitzkrieg: *There was no such thing as a lightning war – it was a propaganda stunt*

for the session on 15 November 2023: Poland and the war in the West

III. Barbarossa *was un-winnable*

for the session on 22 November 2023: Barbarossa and beyond

IV. Moscow: *Had the Germans captured Moscow, they would have won the war (against the Soviet Union)*

for the session on 22 November 2023: Barbarossa and beyond

V. Stalingrad: *Conquering Stalingrad would have substantially changed the course of the war*

for the session on 22 November 2023: Barbarossa and beyond

VI. Second front: *It was the right decision of the Western Allies to wait until opening a second front*

for the session on 27 December 2023: Reversal I

VII. Nuremberg: *The Nuremberg Trial was a good punishment for the Nazi leadership*

for the session on 10 January 2024: Ending the war