Prof. Stefan Ihrig student meetings by appointment stefan.ihrig@googlemail.com
Wednesdays, 16:00-19:00

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 and the background of 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) two special tasks (short commentary text on documentary clips & split reading/team project on "Soldaten"), 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 advised 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 1: Comments on documentary

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 of presenting the topic.

Clips from documentaries are provided for many of the various topics. It will be your job, to write a very short feedback text citing at least three of these clips. The text needs to be only one page in length and can be either in bullet points or text. These should cover a) points well done in the

documentary; b) points not well done; c) suggestions on how to do it differently. This assignment will have to be submitted (online) by session no. 13.

Project II: **Soldaten *reading***

Sign up for a chapter of the *Soldaten* (soldiers) book of week 11. 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.

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.

Note on plagiarism and AI

Familiarize yourself with what constitutes **plagiarism**. 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. Given that AI language support is freely available, the final paper should be polished in style, spelling, and grammar.

Submission deadline: by week 10! (by 16 December 2026, 23:59)

Upload your paper via Moodle (bottom of page) by week 10, Sunday 28 December. (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 it by the last day of Semester B.

If for any reason you have been granted an extension, do not expect that your papers will 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: A Century of War and Genocide
14 October 2026

no assigned reading (start reading ahead)

Week 2: Backgrounds I
21 October 2026

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

Week 3: Backgrounds II
28 October 2026

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

Week 4: 1939-1941: Poland and the war in the West
4 November 2026

reading
Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, ch. 1/1, 2/1, 2/2.

Week 5: Barbarossa
11 November 2025

reading
Overy, *Russia's War*, ch. 3 & 4;
Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, ch. 3.

Week 6: War in the Soviet Union
18 November 2026

see week 5

25 November 2026 *reading week*

Week 8: Reversal I
2 December 2026

reading

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

Week 9: Reversal II
9 December 2026

reading

Weinberg, chapters 12 & 13.

Week 10: Homefront and bombing war
16 December 2026

watch historians' & philosophers' discussion online before (link on moodle)

optional reading

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

Week 11: Soldiers: Einsatzgruppen, SS, and Wehrmacht
23 December 2026

reading

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

Week 12: Ending the war
30 December 2026

reading

Weinberg, chapters 14 & 15

Week 13: Final discussion: The War and the Holocaust
6 January 2027 *no assigned reading*