

Man or Myth?

In the decades since World War II, there have been many attempts to glorify this generation through the media. *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* by Kenneth D. Rose, attempts to pare back the delusions of grandeur that often characterize histories of the World War II generation to show society as it was rather than how we have come to perceive it. Rose claims that often times when commentators focus on wars, they choose stories that are meant to make the population feel good as opposed to showing the realities. As a result, in retrospect wars seem to generate heightened patriotism and national unity (1). In this book, Rose hopes to give true honor to the Americans of this generation, not by glorifying their contributions, but by presenting a picture more in line with the historical record, hoping that in doing so his work will deliver a more accurate portrayal of “Americans at war” (3). Rose chooses not to rely heavily on secondary source material, but rather to highlight the first-hand accounts of individuals who experienced the war. He does so in order to give them proper credit but also to show that the so-called Greatest Generation was not without flaws, and was indeed an ordinary generation that lived through traumatic events that tested their character (7).

Rose divides the book into four parts, focusing first on “Americans Abroad.” He looks at the accounts of not only the soldiers themselves, but also the war correspondents who traveled with these companies. He then shifts his attention to the home front, recreating the character of the time by using sources such as census records, advertisements, and literature. Part three, “Americans and the Culture of World War II,” recounts the impact of popular media during the war and how they were able to be harnessed and made useful to the war effort. Rose’s final chapters in Part IV discuss the end of the war and the changes in American society once the boys came home.

Chapter one of Rose’s account attempts to give a picture of what warfare was like for the soldiers. He paints a brutal picture of the Japanese calling them sadistic (17). However, he also highlights that the Americans were forced to match this style of fighting making the Pacific theater particularly savage. He contrasts this to the “fair” style of warfare on the European front in which both sides abided by the Geneva Accords (16). After laying out the style of fighting that took place, Rose alludes to the reasons the soldiers would fight, calling them the “Delights” – namely that of seeing, camaraderie, and destruction (26). Rose also stresses in this chapter the psychological toll the war took on the soldiers, noting that medical discharges due to “neuropsychiatric causes” had increased to 43 percent by the last year of the war (31). As these soldiers went overseas, the temptations they faced also increased. During the war there was a significant increase in behavior deemed as “vice,” which included promiscuity, drinking, smoking, and black market trading.

Rose next explains combat itself in “Combat Remembered.” He notes that censorship understandably proved an abiding problem for wartime correspondents throughout the conflict. Government insisted that the war be presented in a positive light not only due to increasing fervor back home, but also to keep up morale (45-46). After the war as soldiers returned home, they began to publish their own wartime memoirs that told stories that contrasted starkly to those most Americans had heard during the war – a contrast that often proved shocking to the public. (54).

One of the largest discrepancies that Rose points out between wartime reality and the “Greatest Generation” myth is the idea of patriotism. Today, the war years are often portrayed as a period when everyone enthusiastically “did their part” for the war effort, especially the soldiers who enlisted in mass. In “Why We Fight” Rose points out that this heightened patriotism, while present just after Pearl Harbor, did not last for the duration of the conflict (61). For this reason, the government resorted to wartime propaganda to counter “American indifference” (64).

The next chapter recounts how the United States mobilized following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Rose discusses how the federal government justified the opening of Japanese American relocation camps as a “protective measure” (82-83). He also discusses the qualifications to enlist in the armed forces which were initially quite stringent, but notes that they loosened considerably towards

the end of the war, as the need for more soldiers arose. As a result, most soldiers entering the military near the end of the war had less than an 8th grade education (85). As the wartime industries mobilized, cities grew crowded and a housing shortage developed. Increases in crime, pollution, and racial tensions soon followed (88). The introduction of more women into the workforce, though it helped increase production, had negative effects on society, such as an increase in promiscuity (102).

Women in the workplace and other social issues stirred controversy while the men were off fighting. Rose discusses these issues in "The Home Front and Its Discontents." He critiques the rushed marriages that sent soldiers off with "someone to come home to" as well as the divorces that resulted when husbands had been gone so long (107). He states that 31 out of 100 of these wartime marriages ended in divorce (109). In discussing women in the workplace, he points out that there was an increase not only in child neglect but also juvenile delinquency that resulted from neither parent being home (110-115). Rationing proved one important way that the population could help the war effort, however, this also led to an increase of black market trading. This act of defiance precipitated widespread questioning of the rationing system, given the abundance of black market goods (124).

In his next chapter, "Life at the Margins," Rose reviews the treatment of individuals outside the white, Protestant mainstream: blacks, Jews, homosexuals, and Japanese Americans. Blacks faced segregation and persecution throughout the war as a matter of course, but especially in the workforce where they were often excluded from well-paying jobs despite the need for workers (133). The military as well remained segregated, allowing blacks to hold only menial jobs, or jobs where they would "do the most good" (140). Those who did face combat were respected and accepted while they fought, but once the fighting ended, old prejudices resumed (142). The treatment of Jews was slightly better than that of racial minorities. As a result of the war, there was an increase in pride among the Jewish population in America, although anti-Semitism still remained common in American society (146). As for homosexuals, as long as they were not "overt," the military and society seemed to let them be, and even popularize them in novels (152-153). The anti-Japanese feeling resulted in Executive Order 9066 that allowed the government to relocate them for national security – or "protective custody" as they were told. This resulted in a public outcry as their civil liberties were taken away (155-156). Just as Black Americans who fought proved their worth, Japanese Americans enlisted and were drafted and these combat units came back highly decorated (158).

Chapter 7 covers how popular media, such as films, music, shows, and literature tried to sustain positive outlook in the population as well as in the soldiers themselves. Many of the actors and musicians were able to help by either visiting the troops, or joining up themselves, helping morale. Just as the government attempted to control the correspondents and what was printed about the war, it also attempted to control popular entertainment so that it could encourage the war effort as opposed to detracting from the purpose (183). Audiences, however, did not always "buy" the patriotic messages, preferring entertainment that emphasized hope and other more basic sentiments.

In looking at literature in Chapter 8, Rose emphasizes that the "war novels" published after the war did not glorify the conflict as had happened after World War I. Instead, they often showed the realities of life during the war period, both the good and the bad, and touched on such sensitive themes as anti-Semitism, adultery, and class divisions (188). Those novels published later were often more bitter or cynical when referencing the war period and many took such a negative tone that they seem explicitly "anti-war" (198). Much of the poetry that emerged from the war also featured this negative tone, focusing on the atrocities of war and the lack of idealism among the population (203). The authors after the war reflected the attitude portrayed earlier, that patriotism was not a significant factor in World War II for the American population (204).

As the fighting became more intense during the final German offensive and the Nazi atrocities were revealed, the soldiers' feeling of alienation from those on the home front grew even more pronounced. Still, American soldiers were able to differentiate between Germans and Nazis (216). After the war ended in Europe, hostilities in the Pacific raged on despite the belief that they as well would soon come to an end. Indeed, the war's final year ultimately proved the most difficult (217). The decision to drop the Atomic Bomb later became highly controversial, however most Americans at

the time considered ending the war in such a way far preferable to the alternative – a prolonged invasion of Japan that would result in many more casualties (218).

The final chapter discusses how soldiers returned home to differing attitudes toward the war and chronicles the disillusionment that led to resentment and difficulty adapting to civilian life. Rose also notes the widespread concerns about a possible return to an economic depression due to demobilization (232), the changes in family structure, and the change in the soldiers themselves (237).