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Brian Best. *Reporting the Second World War*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2015.

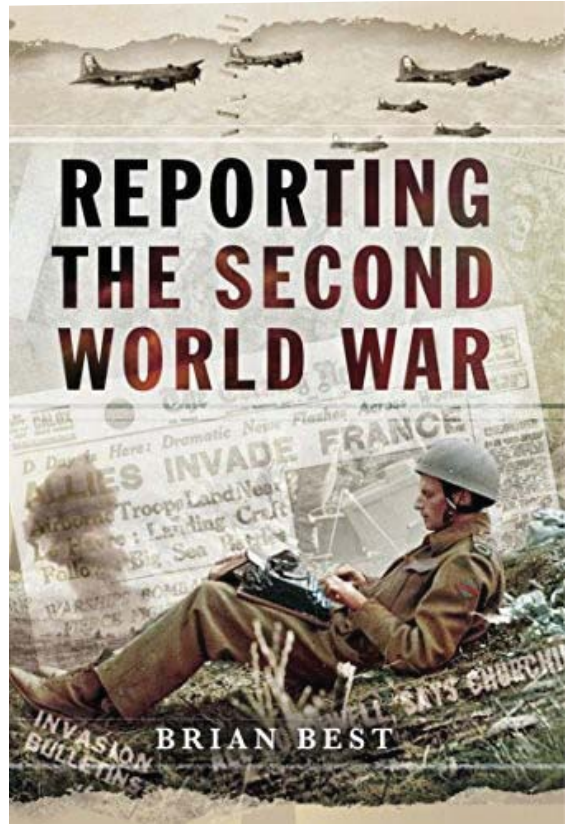
Book Review

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In *Reporting the Second World War*, author Brian Best conveys the World War II experience through the words of British Commonwealth and American war correspondents. Best divides his book into sixteen chapters, arranged partly chronologically and partly thematically, and dealing with a certain front or aspect of the war. Laudably, the book begins with and includes the Spanish Civil War, where a number of World War II correspondents first gained exposure. In addition, the book includes the correspondents' experiences in theaters like Finland and Burma. Best also includes some information on the Pacific War, as well as a



chapter dedicated to propaganda and press censorship. Nevertheless, the book's emphasis is on the war in Western Europe and the Mediterranean Basin—theaters which heavily featured Western Allied correspondents.

Best suggests that World War I and World War II correspondents were different breeds. According to Best, in Britain's case, her Great War correspondents, primarily middle-aged men, returned home in 1918 with badly tarnished reputations. Having had very little access to the fighting front, their

apparent readiness to embrace the heavily censored official view caused bitter resentment from soldiers and civilians alike, as proof of upper-echelon incompetence and the gritty details of the suffering in the trenches came out. The generation that set out to cover the second global conflict was generally much younger and more energetic than that of World War I and included a number of women. Its combination of youth and idealism helped set the stage for what was arguably the “golden age” of war reporting (p.vi-vii).

Compared to their Great War forerunners—and immeasurably helped by their governments’ more enlightened view on war reporting—Western World War II correspondents gained an unprecedented level of access to the fighting front, on land, sea, and in the air. Correspondents shared bivouacs with soldiers. In Burma, several correspondents followed the famous Chindit raiders on their deep penetration operations into the jungle behind Japanese lines. One correspondent, an experienced skier, joined white-clad Finnish troops as they ambushed Red Army formations during the 1939–40 Winter War. A number of other correspondents went on bombing raids and sailed on naval vessels in the heat of battle. Inevitably, their dedication to their profession cost some of them their lives. Accidents, artillery, and small arms fire claimed their fair share, while others went down in the planes they flew. One British correspondent, Bernard Gray, was even lost aboard the submarine HMS *Urge*, sunk by a mine in the Mediterranean. Their narratives are some of the most colorful first-person accounts of World War II. Without a doubt, posterity owes these brave war correspondents much for their insight into the war, despite the often heavy hand of government censors (p. 22–23, 67, 115–17).

Best uses an “in their own words” approach to convey the magisterial narratives of the war’s most famous reporting personalities, many who went on to become household names. Some of these include Edward Murrow, Ernie Pyle, Walter Cronkite, Richard Dimbleby, Ian Morrison, Martha Gellhorn, Virginia Cowles, and Edward Kennedy, to name a few. Kennedy gained notoriety for violating the thirty-six-hour news embargo on the German surrender in May 1945, and it is because of this the Western world, to this day, commemorates VE (Victory in Europe) Day on 8 May, while in the former Soviet Union it is commemorated on 9 May. Famous photographers like Gerda Taro, an early casualty who was killed while covering the Spanish Civil War, and Robert Capa, who immortalized the American-sector landings on D-Day, are also included. Ernest Hemingway’s penchant for bizarre behavior is amply demonstrated, and while it seems that Best, at times, has it out for the iconic American writer, this author cannot fault his assessment of Hemingway as a rather undignified personality (p.205–6, 220).

Best's book, with its focus on the war in Western Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, does come with one caveat. Noticeably absent are any serious references to the Eastern Front—it is compressed into a chapter with the early Pacific War and covers only three and a half pages. There is nothing on the German-Soviet war between 1942 and the Battle of Berlin in 1945. Equally absent is anything dealing with Allied Soviet war correspondents. The book's scope is comparably narrow and Anglo-American centric, and thus overemphasizes peripheral theaters like the Western Desert (important though this campaign was for Great Britain and Fascist Italy). Best ignores the writings of high-profile Soviet war correspondents like Vasily Grossman or Ilya Ehrenburg. There are other criticisms, including a fair share of typos, which, sadly, appear to be the norm for the publisher Pen and Sword/Seaforth. In setting the historical scene for the correspondents' vibrant narratives, the book is also factually imprecise. For example, Best's suggestion that Nazi Germany's last-ditch Ardennes Offensive in December 1944 was conducted by just two divisions is a rather significant understatement—Operation *Wacht am Rhein*, as the German offensive was codenamed, was conducted by no less than three field armies. This is not a crippling oversight, as Best's book is first and foremost about the narratives and experiences of war correspondents, but for readers not well-versed in World War II such errors can cause confusion (p.187).

There are other books available on the lives and experiences of Western Allied World War II correspondents. Some examples include *Reporting War* by Ray Moseley, *The War Beat, Europe* by Steven Casey, *Ernie Pyle's War* by James Tobin, and *Assignment to Hell* by Timothy Gay. None of the aforementioned books, however, cover the sheer number of British Commonwealth and American correspondents—160 plus—the way that Best manages to do, although at just over 200 pages his coverage of each correspondent is fairly superficial. In conclusion, while Best's anemic coverage of the Eastern Front may find its share of criticisms, for what it is clearly intended to be—a book on Western Allied war correspondents—*Reporting the Second World War* succeeds in building a vivid narrative of their experiences, and is a welcome addition to the voluminous literature on World War II.