The Theft of Childhood: Depictions of the Second World War in The Dolphin Crossing and Dawn of Fear

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Abstract

This essay considers how history’s deadliest conflict was (or could be) represented in children’s literature. I have chosen two British chapter books, in part, for personal reasons. Like Jill Paton Walsh and Susan Cooper, my mother was a child in Britain during the Second World War and experienced many of the events those authors describe. Her father, however, (who was held as a prisoner of war in what is now Poland) never spoke about the war. That silence—common among ex-combatants—was finally broken a generation later. By the late 1960s, authors such as Paton Walsh and Cooper began to describe the Second World War for those children whose parents had grown up amidst its heroism and horror.

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At the beginning of the Second World War, Europe was dominated by fascism. The workers’ movements in Britain and the US had been crushed and demoralised during the depression. All the leaders of the Russian Revolution had been murdered and the USSR was held in the iron grip of Stalin. The national liberation movements in the Far East had been brutally suppressed. Stalinism did not have a perspective of leading wars of national liberation struggles in the countries such as China and Vietnam where the Communist Parties held the leading position in the national liberation movements. Nor was it the perspective of the Communist Parties in the old capitalist countries to make socialist revolution. Mutual fear and distrust of one another’s policies and the concern for security, prevented progress towards disarmament. The British and French policies of keeping up the development of armaments provided Hitler the much needed handle to justify the arming of Germany. Arming of Germany under Hitler intensified the armament race and it came to be a major cause of the Second World War. Another important factor which indirectly led to the collapse of the inter-war system and to the outbreak of World War II, was the economic depression of 1930s. The pressure caused by this development gave rise to the emergence of centralized and dictatorial regimes in Germany, Italy and several other states of Europe. Such states resorted to imperialist and expansionist policies. The war of 1939, far from being premeditated, was a mistake, the result on both sides of diplomatic blunders. This onslaught on accepted beliefs, coming as it did from a writer with a high reputation as a diplomatic historian, was received by the critics in Britain with a remarkable degree of respect and approval. But what Hitler has to say about his ultimate objectives, particularly in Chapter XIV of the second volume, can be compared with Hitler’s subsequent actions as ruler of Germany as well as with his statements of policy in the secret directives given to his generals. The most significant passages of this chapter have often been quoted, but it seems worthwhile to quote them again since Mr. Taylor chooses to ignore them.