

Some Preliminary Considerations when Teaching WWII History

The following guidelines will help you and your students focus on the most important aspects and themes of World War II history:

1. Don't glorify war.

Throughout history there have been cultures and regimes in which warfare was a central tenet of society. In these cultures it is considered normal and proper to expect war, prepare for war, and be in a state of war. In the United States, because of our geography, origins and evolution, and democratic constitutional system, it has always been considered abnormal to be in a state of war. While we have risen to the occasion during wartime, we are always eager to return to a time of peace. When we study war, however, students often get swept up in the excitement of the conflict, concentrating solely on the violence, technology, heroics, and drama of the battlefield. When we do this, we misdirect our attention from the more important issues of war: its causes and effects and the lessons to be learned by its participants and by future generations. War, while sometimes necessary and often thrilling, is always destructive. It should not be glorified or mythologized. We do our students and ourselves a disservice if we romanticize war or promote the idea that warfare and violence is a proper end in itself.

2. Properly set the stage.

Only by examining the fascist and totalitarian ideas and values espoused by the Axis countries and their leaders can students comprehend the dangers the world faced during World War II and, hence, understand the importance of our victory. Wherever Hitler and his Nazis or the Japanese military conquered, they brought with them intolerance, terror, murder, and genocide. For Hitler, the peoples and lands of Europe existed only to serve an ever-expanding Germany. His program, clearly spelled out in earlier writings and speeches, called for the extermination or enslavement of unwanted populations—Jews, Gypsies, Communists, Slavs, homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled, and anyone who disagreed with the Nazis. The successful opening of the second front in France by the Allies was fundamental to the Nazi defeat in World War II. The Japanese thought similarly of the peoples of Asia and the Pacific. With each d-day in the Pacific, we liberated native peoples and came closer to defeating the Japanese Empire.

The United States was not a perfect country during the war. There was racism, discrimination, and intolerance here, too. The U.S. made mistakes along the way as it fought WWII. The most glaring example of this was the treatment of Japanese Americans along the West Coast. But be careful of establishing false equivalencies, i.e. "Well, both sides did bad things during the war. So, therefore, both sides were equally responsible for the war occurring and for its atrocities."

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3. Stress the unique enormity of the war.

WWII was the largest and most destructive war in human history. There were more deaths, more injuries, more buildings destroyed, more men under arms, more economies and societies mobilized than ever before or since. Battles were fought across continents and across oceans, on the ground, in the air and on the sea. Civilians bore the brunt of these battles in ways that they never had during previous wars. It is estimated that 40-50 million of the estimated 70 million people who died due to WWII were civilians. Advances in science, technology, medicine, and communications experienced enormous leaps as countries sought to improve their war-fighting abilities. These advancements gave birth to many of our modern-day technologies, including computers, jet air travel, space exploration and satellite communications through rocketry and radar, modern antibiotics, and, of course, atomic weapons.

Perhaps most important, WWII saw the greatest wartime atrocities committed in history. The in humane treatment of POWs and civilians by the Japanese is well documented. The murder of as many as 12 million people—six million of them Jews—by Nazi Germany stands as the most organized and systematic examples of genocide the world has ever seen.

4. Emphasize the values that won the war.

We honor those who served and those who contributed to our victory in World War II best by celebrating the values that saw us through the conflict. From these values we can learn about the best of humanity and strive to better ourselves, our communities, and the world. These values included **teamwork, optimism, courage, and sacrifice.**

- The Allied victory over the Axis powers in World War II represented an unprecedented level of international cooperation and teamwork. National and personal rivalries and disagreements had to be put aside for the greater good of all. Studying that teamwork teaches students important lessons in working together to overcome difficulties, solve problems, and reach personal and community victories.
- In the darkest hours of the twentieth century, when Nazi Germany had taken over most of Europe and the Japanese Empire had conquered large parts of Asia and the Pacific, the Allies kept their spirits high and their sights on total victory. Faced with the horrors of totalitarianism and war, the Allies never gave up their struggle to liberate Europe, North Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. By appreciating that optimism, students learn to face the challenges of their communities with their own youthful optimism.
- Courage is commonplace in war. Courage by soldiers on the battlefield, by leaders and officers making decisions, by people producing on the Home Front, even by children who often endure tremendous personal losses of their own. Students studying these examples of courage are impelled to examine their own opportunities to exhibit courage in their lives.
- A sacrifice is an act of unselfishness. The numbers of dead and wounded attest to the ultimate sacrifices made by thousands in the name of freedom and democracy. Sacrifices come in all shapes and sizes. Students benefit from recognizing that often times we gain more—personally and as a community—by giving something up for a cause in which we believe.

5. Personalize the history.

Students will make a personal connection and gain a better understanding of WWII history when they explore the personal sides of the story. Statistics, dates, and battles show the overwhelming size and complexities of WWII. But students can learn more about the realities of war through personal histories, letters, memoirs, and diaries of soldiers and loved ones on the Home Front. There are as many WWII experiences as there were participants. Each individual's story is a personal encapsulation of the war's overall history. These intimate sources offer students an opportunity to read the voices of WWII as told, not by official military historians, but by the ordinary men and women who were there. These types of sources help students attain a deeper understanding of all kinds of history.

For this reason, the Museum encourages teachers and students to seek out opportunities to conduct oral history interviews with WWII veterans and others who lived through the war years.

6. Make it relevant.

Students become interested in history when they can recognize relevance to their own lives and times. It might seem impossible to find relevance between the trauma of WWII and the everyday lives of students. That is why The National WWII Museum stresses the common values that made our victory in WWII a success. The concepts of teamwork, optimism, courage, and sacrifice can be cultivated and expressed by every student in countless situations. Other concepts integral to the WWII story—the importance of decision-making, problem solving, honor, loyalty, camaraderie—need constantly to be explored and cultivated in students' lives. Many soldiers, sailor, and Marines in WWII were not much older than high school students. On the Home Front everyone, even children, experienced the fear, uncertainty, and shortages of wartime. They also shared in the responsibility for making sure the country was prepared to fight and win the war. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to identify with the feelings, actions and reactions of the WWII generation. The Museum's mission is only satisfied when students realize that every generation—even their own—can rise to the occasion and attain victory in whatever battles they encounter.

Our Mission Statement

The National World War II Museum tells the story of the American Experience in the war that changed the world - why it was fought, how it was won, and what it means today so that all generations will understand the price of freedom and be inspired by what they learn.