ED348319 1992-06-00 World War II in the Curriculum. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Identifier: ED348319
Publication Date: 1992-06-00
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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education Bloomington IN.

World War II in the Curriculum. ERIC Digest.

In 1991, the fiftieth anniversary of the United States' entrance into World War II was observed. This is an opportune time to reevaluate and renew the teaching of this cataclysmic event. Most people have been affected by the political, economic, and

social consequences of the war. But perhaps the most important reason to rededicate ourselves to teaching about World War II is that the experience is still near enough in time to provide retrospective interest for those who lived through it and to spark intellectual curiosity among those unborn at the time.

WHY EMPHASIZE WORLD WAR II IN U.S. AND WORLD HISTORY COURSES

There are many debates about what to teach in the social studies curriculum. However, there is a consensus on the need to emphasize World War II, as it is a major turning point in world history. World War II involved the largest armed forces, the longest battle lines, and the most destructive weapons of any war. It inflicted more suffering, more destruction, and more deaths.
Good history teaching emphasizes global turning points --- those events that have had the most far-reaching consequences, for the largest number of people, across the broadest areas of the Earth. Knowledge of World War II and other global turning points in history advances one's understanding of how our contemporary society developed. This knowledge, of course, is the necessary foundation for effective thought and action by our students about the important political events and public issues of their lives.

Many students, however, are failing to achieve knowledge about the causes, events, and consequences of World War II. In the 1986 National Assessment of History and Literature, most 17-year-old students said they had studied World War II, yet only 53 percent of them knew that Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union when the United States entered the war (Ravitch and Finn 1987, 55). In a set of questions on the World War II period, high school students were tested on (1) factors leading up to the United States' involvement in the war, (2) characteristics of the war, (3) the end of the war, and (4) the United Nations. In general, students performed dismally on this set of questions. For example, 45% did not know that Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps during World War II. Fewer than two students in five (39.5%) put D-Day in the correct four-year period.

In THE U.S. HISTORY REPORT CARD (1988, 53), the NAEP reported a similar pattern of poor achievement. The students responding to the survey's questions displayed a particularly weak understanding of the causes and events of World War II, and other 20th-century events which profoundly influenced our country and the world.

Students cannot achieve high levels of knowledge of World War II unless it is treated effectively in the school curriculum. In order to teach a topic carefully and emphatically, sufficient time must be allotted to cover the topic. The majority of our students study world and U.S. history sporadically across their twelve years of schooling. Most students study U.S. history in the 8th grade and not again until the 11th grade. The students often forget much of what they learned three years prior, and the teacher must

spend precious time rehashing early U.S. history. Naturally, this limits the amount of time available to begin serious study of mid-20th century events, such as World War II. However, an intensive study of 20th-century U.S. history is a trend in recently developed state curriculum guides for high school U.S. history courses. This trend should be encouraged, as it allows for more coverage of the causes, events, and consequences of World War II.

WEAKNESSES OF TEXTBOOK TREATMENT OF WORLD WAR II

Another possible explanation for students' ignorance of World War II is textbooks that are bland, superficial, unclear, and sometimes inaccurate.
Paul Gagnon, in both his U.S. history and world history textbooks studies (1987 and 1989), has documented the inadequacies of the textbook treatments of World War II. He discusses four themes the textbooks either neglect or present poorly, which should be emphasized: (1) students should be helped to imagine the probable consequences of a Nazi victory; (2) students need to know the actual consequences of fighting war on such a scale and of achieving total victory over the Axis powers; (3) textbooks need to clarify the complex causes of the Second World War; and (4) texts should examine the policy of appeasement because it provides insight into the difficulties of making foreign policy in democratic societies (Gagnon 1989, 124-25).

Another flaw of several best-selling history textbooks is numerous inaccurate statements. A recent report documented "the discovery of thousands of errors in the latest U.S. history textbooks" (Putka 1992, 114). Several striking errors pertained to World War II. One major textbook, for example, wrongly dated the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Another book misdated such events as Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland. In a third widely used textbook, students were asked why Churchill "delay[ed] sending troops to Stalingrad?" In reality, Churchill did not send troops to Stalingrad at all, nor did he ever contemplate it. Students must be taught to critically read, analyze, and evaluate the information and interpretations presented to them, in textbooks or any other form.

SUGGESTED WAYS TO TEACH WORLD WAR II.

As with any turning point in history, the major question of what and how to teach about an event of such proportions is a challenging one. There is simply not enough time to cover every aspect of the war. Postholing, the practice of exploring a few events or key people in depth, lends itself very well to the study of World War II.
The geographic factors of the war could be one possible area of in-depth study. Conflicting claims on land were among the causes of World War II. For example, Germany saw Poland as a particularly desirable target. About a third of its population

was of non-Polish stock, including many ethnic Germans, and it contained many natural resources the German government desired. Germany was also intent on regaining territory lost after its defeat in World War I; most Germans believed it had been taken from them unfairly. Geography played a crucial role in the defeat of Germany. For example, students can trace the German advances into Russia until the supply lines became too long and the severe Russian winter weather stopped their march toward Moscow. The political geography of Europe changed drastically as a result of World War II. Students need to know how and why the Allied powers divided Germany at the conclusion of the war, in order to understand the significance of the recent reunification. They must also be taught why and how the Soviet Union came to impose communism in Central and Eastern European countries that recently have achieved their freedom.

The economic causes and results of the second World War provide another avenue of in-depth study. The economic cost of the second World War has been conservatively estimated at least at $2 trillion dollars, with the United States having spent more than $288,000,000,000, Germany more than $212,000,000,000, and Japan more than $41,000,000,000. An in-depth study of the economy of the United States during the war provides valuable insights into the reasons why the Allies were triumphant. Between 1941 and 1945, the national debt rose from forty-eight billion to two hundred and forty-seven billion dollars. Have students compare that debt with today's national debt and discuss the implications for the country, both then and now. The United States produced 296,601 aircraft, 71,060 ships, and 86,388 tanks in the five year span of the second World War. Eighty-five percent of the war production plants needed for the war effort were built by the government. Invite people who worked in these plants into the classroom and have them describe their feelings of helping the war effort and how rationing affected them. Discuss the role women played in the homefront efforts to produce the materials needed for the war. Approximately 2 million women joined or replaced men in the nation's war plants, where they received 60% less pay than did their male counterparts, and they had no job security.

Another great way to stimulate students' interest is to introduce them to some of the more colorful, but perhaps less known, personalities of the war. Most students know who Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, and Hitler were. But go down the chains of command and take a closer look at people like General Jimmy Doolittle, Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, and General George S. Patton. For instance, introduce the fact that each of these important men had a well-earned nickname. Doolittle was known throughout the war as the "Master of the Calculated Risk." Ask students to read more about this man who earned a Ph.D. from MIT in aeronautical engineering. Ask the students to do some research on Bernard Montgomery to answer this question: Should he, not Eisenhower, have been named to lead the D-Day invasion of France? After having conducted research on George S. Patton, ask students whether or not (and why) he deserved his accolade of being "the greatest combat general of modern times and the most inspiring" (Blumenson 1985, 11).

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS

A new book published by the National Center for History in the Schools, LESSONS FROM HISTORY: ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES STUDENTS SHOULD ACQUIRE, provides guidelines for what to include in the history curriculum and how to develop skills of historical reasoning and inquiry. The National Center for History in the Schools was created to conduct research and dissemination activities to improve history teaching and learning in the nation's elementary and secondary schools.
In LESSONS FROM HISTORY, there is a chapter about what should be taught about the second World War. The National Center for History in the Schools recommends emphasis on the following topics: (1) the origins of World War II, including the rise of Fascism and Nazism, militarism and imperialism in Japan, aggression and appeasement, and the American entry into war; (2) the main stages and turning points, including the period of intense danger, the turnaround, and the elements of victory; (3) World War II on the American homefront, including economic changes and effects, social changes, and internment of Japanese Americans; (4) wartime planning for postwar international cooperation and peace, including the Atlantic Charter, the Bretton Woods Conference, and the Tehran and Yalta agreements (Crabtree et al. 1992, 163).

Order LESSONS FROM HISTORY from The National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Moore Hall 231, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1521; the telephone number is (310) 825-4702. The price is $17.50, but there is a special discount for bulk purchases of LESSONS FROM HISTORY.

REFERENCES AND ERIC RESOURCES

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 or (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most larger public or university libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal sections of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below or ordered through Interlibrary Loan.
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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062009. The

opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.

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Title: World War II in the Curriculum. ERIC Digest.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Target Audience: Administrators, Teachers, Practitioners
Descriptors: Curriculum Development, Educational Objectives, History Instruction, Secondary Education, Social Studies, Student Educational Objectives, Teaching Methods, United States History, World History, World War II
Identifiers: ERIC Digests
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