

History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for March 11, 2021

Main Reading: Yawp, chapter 24 + Baker, Growing Up, chap. 13-18

This Yawp chapter covered World War II. These chapters in Russell Baker's memoir concern how his family experienced the coming of the war, his stateside service in the navy, and then ultimately his post-war life and ultimate marriage to Mimi Nash. Here are selections from student comments:

INVASION OF POLAND (1939)

STUDENT COMMENT: Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 was what triggered the European war. Immediately after the invasion, France and Britain declared war on Germany. The versatile Nazi forces caused problems for the French faster than they had predicted. Germany made quick work occupying Poland and shortly after seized the Northern half of France in 1940. This led to the eventual formation of the Allied Powers consisting, most dominantly, of France, Britain, The Soviet Union, China, and The United States. Once the war was going on in Europe, the American people had differing views about whether to enter the war. Some were able to see that the invasion of Poland meant eventual American Involvement, but others who were more generally opposed to war did not want to involve themselves in this war especially because many of them had lived through the first world war. This is demonstrated well in Russell Baker's memoir *Growing Up* on page 249 when Russell describes giving a newspaper to a man who read of the invasion of Poland and said, "So it's war." Russell later describes his family's discussion at breakfast where his mother says, "This is England's war, let England fight it." Clearly, Russell's mother was none too bothered by the rising Nazi empire. Eventually the United States did join the war in 1941 after the bombing of pearl harbor, which rid The United States of the option to remain neutral in this war.

PEARL HARBOR (1941)

STUDENT COMMENT: While Japan's role in WW II was significant, it was not immediately obvious until Pearl Harbor was bombed. Japan had already set its sights on China before the bombing of the South Manchuria Railway that led to its official invasion of Chinese territories. Plagued by its stagnant domestic economy and need for resources, it needed new markets and raw materials to provide a boost. The Chinese army was unprepared for the onslaught and was powerless against the organized forces of the Japanese Imperial Army as it took over various regions. The Japan violent movement began in 1931, and was largely ignored by the rest of the world. Chinese leaders petitioned to the League of Nations, whose only action seemed to be the Stimson Act. This act refused to accept Japan's territories in China as legitimate. Madam Chiang, wife of Chiang Kai-shek, a leader of the Chinese army, also pleaded with the Congress, but her efforts seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. The U.S. was wholly unprepared for war and had no intention of counteracting the Japanese army. This disconnect is further highlighted throughout Russell's adolescence and his lack of knowledge on world politics. He may not be at fault as most of the information was centered around the actions of Mussolini and Hitler. This is most evidenced with Russell's reaction when Pearl Harbor was bombed. According to him,

Japan was a "tiny country...a few specks on the map." His reaction reveals the detachment many felt to the Japanese's actions. The nonchalant attitude the government adopted towards the Japanese invasions was already reflected among its people. If Russell who was much more educated than most was lacking in this regard, then other uneducated and illiterate Americans were worse off.

WARTIME MOBILIZATION (1942)

STUDENT COMMENT: In *Growing Up*, Russell Baker gives a firsthand account of a quickly changing America amid World War II, as its young men rise to the call of war. According to Baker, "Boys I'd known in high school were already uniform. Others were registering for the draft" (Baker 262). It touches upon the vast appeal of American patriotism at the time that would spark an economic boom, as "The Roosevelt administration urged citizens to save their earnings or buy war bonds to prevent inflation" (Yawp 34). War bonds were extremely successful, supporting almost "twenty million American workers placed into military service," while "unemployment virtually disappeared" (Yawp 24). In doing so, Baker goes on to show how college institutions were not spared, as "Responding to the speeded-up pace of wartime America, Hopkins was operating on a year-round schedule with no summer vacation" (Baker 262). Therefore, in almost every social sphere, America became shaped by the war effort. Amid a wartime economic boom, Baker gives a greater insight into how everyday private and public institutions, such as colleges, also served a role in mobilizing America's finest men for war overseas.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND WARTIME

STUDENT COMMENT: Although this week's chapter of YAWP was titled World War II, there was so much more covered in this chapter than just that six-year period. This chapter started a decade prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), to describe the origins of the Pacific and European Wars. It also went into detail about wartime economy in the United States, and the transition out of the Great Depression into smaller preceding wars, and then to WWII, which tremendously helped the U.S. economy. Lastly it humanized this war-stricken period by talking at length about soldier's experiences, and how women's and African American rights were affected by WWII. In Russell Baker's book *Growing Up*, chapters 13 - 18 align right around this time in coordination with YAWP Ch. 24, and there are many comparisons to be made. One of the biggest links that stood out to me was how race and segregation were affected by WWII, and in the time leading up America's involvement in the war. In the YAWP chapter it said that "defense industries refused to hire African Americans and the armed forces remained segregated." (YAWP, 24) But, while there was indeed segregation and discrimination in the armed forces, this is not the only place where it was prevalent. In *Growing Up*, around 1940 in chapter 14, Baker described the numerous discussions going on about Joe Louis who was black and could become the new heavyweight champion. In fact, in the book, Baker recounts how white people resented it every time Louis won a match. Even Russell's Mom who, in earlier chapters had taught him to be tolerant, now said that Black people should "know their place." (Baker) So, when Max Schmeling, a German who was the only person to have ever beaten Louis was scheduled to fight him, the white community rejoiced, excited for a victory against Louis and the black community. But, to their surprise, Louis beat Schmeling quickly, and

the black community celebrated, holding a Civil Rights march in the streets, which was the first march that Baker ever saw. Around a year later, Franklin Delano Roosevelt "issued Executive Order 8802" which banned "racial and religious discrimination in defense industries." (YAWP, 24) He also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) which banned discriminatory hiring practices in war related work. (YAWP, 24) Moreover, this was the government's way of showing they wanted to and could stand against prevailing discrimination in the United States.