

Book Reviews

Tracy Campbell, *The Year of Peril: America in 1942*. London: Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-300-23378-0. Pp. xvi, 408. Hardback, \$30.00/ £25.00.

As we all sit here, likely at home, still incapacitated as a global society under the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been few other times that we can relate to in recent memory. The protests of 1968 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 stand as grand historical moments of crisis and opportunity. The terror attack on September 11, 2001 and the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis offered their own challenges, but not existential ones. 1942, however, is perhaps the closest year in which history could have gone either way. In this key period of the Second World War, both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were at their peaks, while Soviet Russia and Great Britain were on their heels. But it was also the year the United States would mobilise and arguably tip the balance, however. Tracy Campbell, Professor of American History at the University of Kentucky, sets out to understand American society in 1942, when it was facing its most dire threat since the U.S. Civil War.

Campbell chose to write *The Year of Peril* because she believes that ‘we can best understand a society by seeing under its greatest stress, when its very existence is in peril... [when] [e]very walk of life was disrupted, and many worried that new forms of terror could come to any town or community’ (pg. xii). As such, she focuses on the changes and continuities of American society. Within the book, she tells the story chronologically, with each chapter a different month, beginning in December 1941, in order to view the year ‘as it unfolded’ (pg. xi). Within each chapter, she tells short stories about the variety of ways the mobilisation affected Americans, from individuals across the country to the leaders in numerous positions of power, forming a collage of viewpoints.

While there are no overarching elements Campbell looks at specifically, preferring to focus on a wide breadth of issues, the same ones always seemingly come up as the bigger plot lines in each month: social cleavages of class, sex and gender, as well as racism; taxes; war production and economic control; rationing versus consumerism; and the impact the war over the long term. Her story is filled with the debates and fights over women in the workforce, equal pay, attempts by individuals, groups, and politicians to both overcome and reinforce white supremacy, refusals to

ration, how it was enforced and the backlash that engendered. It is unknown whether she intentionally chose her short stories to give the reader a sense of how old present-day political arguments are, or whether it is just further proof that debates never die, they just change their character. Either way, this format does help the readers to see themselves in these moments, and where they might fit.

Right from the beginning, Campbell notes how many considered 'what kind of society they wanted if the nation survived....' Victory, for everyone, was not just about defeating the nation's external enemies, it was about defeating internal ones as well. The political debates between U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Confederate elements within the Democratic party, the elements of the Republican party still aligned to Herbert Hoover, and the large-scale support for and against the New Deal repeatedly play out in each chapter. This all comes to a head with the November Congressional election in which Republicans make electoral gains by arguing that winning the war was more important than programs that maintain social cohesion, an argument they would come back to repeatedly to the present day (pg. 199). Here, Campbell makes an astute point that we should all take to heart: 'American electoral history has often demonstrated that there is little correlation between the policies Americans want and the politicians they put in office' (pg. 269).

By using short stories about different events, constantly leaping from one topic to the other, the reader can see the breadth with which the war impacted American society. The narrative is full of interesting bits of information that readers might not have known before. One example is that due to the deprivations of the Great Depression, half of the first recruits to the Army were 'found to be unfit for service due to malnutrition and poor health' (pg. 6). Another, that the mobilisation also meant the mass production of penicillin, saving countless lives globally for decades to come (pg. 77). Yet another, that more children were born in September and October 1942 than in any other time in that year (pg. 219). This style also allows Campbell to link to later events that might affect a reader's life more directly than one might realise. It was noted that the asbestos used in warships during the war, in the words of one 1987 report, 'left a legacy of disease and death' among shipyard workers and naval personnel (pg. 124). Interestingly, a Boston fire later in the year led to both the building safety reforms we all know today, as well as the first systematic study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (pg. 283-284).

One chapter that offered great entertainment was 'June', which focuses on the rumours that helped define the moment. As we live in the time of a disturbingly impressive growth in conspiracy theories, this was also sadly prescient. Campbell declares, rightfully so, that the rumours that abounded 'reveal a society often at war with itself, coming to grips with the external war but also with its own prejudices and fears' (146). Many of these rumours, of course, revolved around African Americans. That they, oddly, were hoping for the uber-racist Nazis and Imperial Japanese to win in order

to liberate them (pg. 149). That African-American men would go on mass rape sprees with all the white men away fighting the war (pg. 152). Or that the Federal Government would use Black soldiers to reimpose a 'Second Reconstruction' on the South (pg. 150-151), as if this was a bad thing. Having not previously heard much about the Office of War Information (OWI), and their attempts to counter these rumours, this chapter was both highly informative, deeply depressing, and one that will give the reader more than a few laughs, rueful and not.

In focusing on the home-front character, however, it was jarring at times to see major military events reduced to a few sentences, perhaps a paragraph or two. The Battle of Midway, for example, which occurred in the middle of 1942, a battle in which 10 bombs hitting the Japanese aircraft carriers in a matter of minutes changed the course of the Pacific theatre, got little more than a few paragraphs. Similarly, the Fall of Singapore and the Philippines, and the Battle of Stalingrad, one of the greatest military grinders in human history, each were just mentioned in passing. While understandable from a narrative perspective, the impact these moments had on the population is left unsatisfactorily dealt with. They often come off as external moments to be regarded, rather than as the outcomes of the mobilisation efforts and the social changes they have wrought.

Regardless, Campbell has produced an easily digestible narrative of American life in a time of great stress and fear, facing the unknown. She also shows what can happen when an entire society is mobilised to meet a great threat. Having failed the tests of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Global Financial Crisis, Climate Change, and now COVID-19, any present-day reader can only marvel at what it might feel like to live, work, strive, and love in a society that actually rises to challenges in order to maintain their democracy and make it better than before.

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