The Untimeliness of the Second World War

by Louis M. Tamminga

We have spent many hours here on the campus of Dordt College talking about the Second World War. Many memories have been related, many experiences have been put into words, and many reminiscences have been shared. All of us, on both sides of the Atlantic, have been affected by this war.

This war is still not over. Many people are still battling its results in their hearts and live their lives under the burden of its lingering pain. This war, like all other wars, refuses to be confined to some dates on a calendar. We say that the war started in 1939, but actually it started many years before. We say the war ended in 1945, but it really has not ended. Its sorrow and pain still seeps into human lives. The Second World War continues through dark nights of loneliness, brokenness, fear, and regret.

The Second World War really began on November 11, 1918, when the First World War ended. The victors imposed crushing burdens on the vanquished, whose anger then called for vengeance from which the next generation found no relief. Another event in this undeclared war took place in 1919 when a rag-tag group who became known as the Nazis formed the National Socialist German Workers Party in Munich. Another move took place in 1923 when Adolf Hitler became the Nazi leader. Other moves followed in short order. In 1928 the Nazis garnered 810,000 votes in the German elections. Six-and-a-half-million Germans voted for Hitler's party in 1930; fourteen million in 1932. In 1933 Hitler became Reichs Kanzelier of Germany.

The politics of terror followed. Loyal Germans fighting a desperate personal war against the powers of evil were brutalized, tortured, and murdered. For them the Second World War began six years before it was officially declared.

I was ten when the war erupted in the Lowlands. I was at the age when children listen to the conversations of grownups. People came together evening after evening to discuss the war. Some predicted doom; others thought Hitler might be the man of the hour to solve Europe's chronic problems. The optimists thought that a war could be averted or, if not, quickly won. England's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, returned from a meeting with

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the Fuhrer in Munich and travelled across England with his "Peace for Our Time" speech. Thus peace became appeasement and the war, not yet marked on history's calendar, had already chalked up a victory for Adolf Hitler.

In September 1939 the German panzer divisions—one of history's largest gatherings of armed might—invaded Poland, giving the world its first glimpse of the devastating power of the blitzkrieg. Ten percent of Poland's population died in those desperate days. England and France waited four long days before declaring war on Germany.

That same fall a small company of scholars sat under a tree on the Harvard University campus. Among them was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German theologian and recent arrival to the U.S. One of his American colleagues said, "Dietrich, you are a lucky man, you can sit out the war on the safe side of the Atlantic." But Dietrich was a prophet of the Lord whose personal war had already begun. He returned to Germany, joined the opposition to Nazi paganism, was arrested, tortured, and hanged.

At 3:00 a.m. on May 10, 1940, one hundred sixty panzer divisions invaded The Netherlands, Belgium, and France. The heart of the open city of Rotterdam was bombed into rubble. Thousands died.

Within a week The Netherlands capitulated. Initially the occupation seemed unreal to the occupied. The German soldiers seemed to have an air of innocence about them. It was an exciting time for us as children. Large numbers of vehicles, strange uniforms, funny helmets, the haunting songs the soldiers sang all attracted us. Even today I feel some guilt when I think of my family's carefree conversations about the exciting times in which we were living.

Earlier that year a new family with a foreign accent had moved into our neighborhood in Leeuwarden. The man practiced dentistry in his home. My brother, who always knew everything about the neighborhood, said that the new people were Jewish and that they had come from Poland. They were friendly to us. As we passed their house on the way home from school the woman would speak to us. One day during the summer following the German invasion a patient knocked at the office door but there was no answer. He called the police and a short time later the bodies of Dr. and Mrs. Wishinsky were carried from the house. They had committed suicide. They had known all along that the Nazi regime was ruthless and that they could expect no mercy from it. They saw no other escape from the Nazi terror.

Before the war was over some five years later 200,000 loyal Dutch partisans had been killed. Of the Allied forces, 244,000 British, 230,000 American, and 109,000 from the Commonwealth countries were killed in action. The heaviest price was paid by the USSR with over 20 million military and civilian deaths. Many of those who suffered and died were children.

On the German side more than 3 million soldiers died in battle. Many of the soldiers who died later in the war were 16- and 17-year-olds.

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For the dead the war is over. For many of the survivors it is not. It is not over for those who were wounded. Some 16 million American troops served in Europe and Asia. Today many of them relive their experiences and must try to make their peace with memories that fade so slowly.

During this conference at Dordt College words of deep appreciation were spoken by the liberated to their liberators. I add my voice to theirs. Your nation gave its best efforts toward ending slavery and suffering. You, by God's grace, brought freedom and relief.

Some Sundays ago I preached in a church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I met a man there who told me that he had served in the Second World War. This is Bob's story.

> I served in the 406th Company of the 102nd Infantry Division of the 9th Army. On November 7, 1944, we found ourselves near the German city of Unweiler. We crawled on our bellies through a field of sugar beets toward the German positions following our squadron leader, Sgt. Ralph Heron. Ralph suddenly jumped up, darted ahead, and lobbed a grenade into the German machine gun emplacement. A hail of machine gun bullets mowed him down. I was able to reach him moments later. Slowly I turned him over. Most of his face had been blown away and he was already dead.

Last fall my wife and I went back to Unweiler—a 45th anniversary of sorts. We found the fields where the battle had taken place, even the place where Sgt. Heron had died. For some time my wife and I stood there. Then we drove west, back to the Dutch border and the province of Limburg. We proceeded to the town of Margraten where at one time 19,000 Allied soldiers were buried. We parked the car in a large, almost deserted, parking area. Another car drove in and parked near us. A woman stepped out carrying a bouquet of flowers. As we greeted each other she recognized the insignia of the 102nd Infantry Division on my lapel and told us that her husband, too, had served in that division. We shook hands and introduced ourselves. She told us that her name was Martha Heron and that her husband, Ralph, had been killed in 1944. "Then your husband was my squadron leader," I told her. We sat down near Ralph's grave. She said that she had never talked to anyone who had served with her husband and that she did not know how he had died. Then I told her of Ralph's last battle and of his heroism. She wiped away her tears and said, "Now the war is over for me too."

Almost half a century later the war is still being waged in the hearts of people who must deal with the guilt forced on them by wartime situations. Several years ago I visited a family that had recently moved into the area of our church. While making acquaintance we talked for a bit about their life. Then, as Dutch people have a way of doing when they talk of the past, someone made a reference to the war. The father of the family said that he had been in a German concentration camp. "Was it hard?" I asked. "Yes," he said and proceeded to tell me this story.

One evening when we returned to our barracks after our day's work in a munitions factory we walked past a small building. The door was open and just inside I saw a table with a pile of sliced bread on it. Before I realized what I was doing I darted in, took a slice of bread, put it in my pocket, and joined the other detainees. Then, behind me, another prisoner did the same, but he was spotted by a guard who immediately apprehended him. He was taken from our group, severely beaten, and dumped on a cart. Then we were forced to stand in a circle around the cart and watch our companion bleed to death from his wounds.

After some silence I said, "Bill, do you feel that you must assume responsibility for that man's death?" He replied, "If I hadn't done it first, he wouldn't have done it, would he?" That's what the war did. Good and well-meaning people were dragged into situations too terrible for any human being to bear. "Bill," I said, "even if you see what you did as wrong, don't you believe that your Savior took that guilt away a long time ago, and that He now wants you to know yourself a free man?" That evening we witnessed God's healing grace in Christ in the restoration of a godly father to renewed personal freedom. After many years Bill's pain from the war was assuaged.

The Second World War continues for many people in the form of hidden anger buried deep their hearts. Soon after the war I found a job in a bank in Amsterdam. There I met another young man also working in the bank and we became friends. He had grown up in Indonesia and had spent the war years there in a Japanese concentration camp. One day he told me that Holland was too small for him and that he wanted to emigrate. "Jan," I said, "I will go with you. Let's go to Canada." "No," he replied, "I want to go to New Zealand. There is something about the Pacific Ocean that pulls me back." So he went to New Zealand and I to Canada, and we lost track of each other. Last year my wife and I visited Australia and New Zealand. As we were roaming around New Zealand's north island I suddenly thought of Jan and wondered what had become of him. At every major population center we checked the telephone book. One day my wife found Jan's name in the phone directory from a city on the south island. I dialed the number and heard a voice that had changed little over the last four decades. For over an hour we talked the usual kind of talk for friends who have not seen each other for a long time— where we had been and what we had done. "I am retired now," he said. My none-too-tactful response was, "You aren't old enough to be retired." Then he told me how he had suffered from a nervous disorder for a number of years. He told me of sleepless nights and depression and of the therapy that had revealed his deep anger against the Japanese camp guards—anger hidden for many years. He told me of his anger for the atrocities he had seen committed against his friends, including

the public beheading of a young girl, the daughter of his pastor, who had been randomly selected for execution. One day the therapist told Jan, "I have done what I can, I must now leave it to you to lay all these memories and all this anger in the hands of Christ, whom you profess to be your Savior." That moment marked the start of Jan's healing. His anger dissolved into forgiveness toward those who had terrorized him and the members of his community, "So," Jan said, "I have become a happy man, enjoying every day of my early retirement and finding many things to do in church and Kingdom."

The war affected a multitude of small happenings in people's lives that may lie dormant in the memory for many years and then suddenly reappear as keenly-felt regrets. Let me tell you about an average family in the central part of The Netherlands during the last two years of the war—a father, a mother, and two young daughters. One day a representative of the Wehrmacht knocked on the door, entered the house uninvited, and quickly inspected it. After a few days he returned with the announcement that the family's living room had been requisitioned for the use of an officer. The officer moved in soon after. In his own way he was a very considerate person. He frequently apologized for the inconvenience he was causing the family. Sometimes he and the family would engage in polite small talk. It soon became evident that the officer had deep reservations about the regime he served. He would produce pictures of his wife and children and express his concern for their well-being. As time went on the two little girls got to know the friendly gentleman and one day the older girl told him that she would soon have a birthday on the day before Christmas. A few days later the officer came to his room carrying an enormous package. He called the family in and asked the little girl to unwrap the package. There it was—the most beautiful doll carriage she had ever laid eyes on. "It's for you," he said, "for your birthday." She was stunned. There was silence. Then the father said, "Sir, you must understand that you belong to a community and we belong to another community. Given the present realities of the war and occupation, it is not possible for us to accept your magnificent present." The officer apologized. "I am sorry. I should have consulted with you first. It was thoughtless of me." Silently they all helped to place the doll carriage back into the box and wrap it up again. Later the officer carried it back to his office.

I know this story is true because years later that family emigrated to Canada, and the girl whose birthday was so close to Christmas became my wife. Her father and mother became my mom and dad and were very precious to me. We once talked about the war years and then I heard this story. My dad said, "I have often thought that perhaps we should have accepted that doll buggy. Why couldn't there have been some sweetness in the life of that officer, to say nothing of ours, during those grim days? But I did it because I thought I had to." Regrets, all the more painful because the war choked off so much that was good and lovely.

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Everywhere there are people for whom the lasting heritage of the war consists of regret tinged with painful remorse. I had a chance to visit with an elderly woman in a Canadian hospital. I asked her about her family. She told me about her children and then she mentioned that her youngest son had died in a Japanese prison camp in Indonesia. She had sent him one evening to a small shed where the children could wash themselves under a trickle of water, a primitive sort of shower. The little boy had come back without his towel and she had scolded him because towels were hard to come by. He had run back to the shed to retrieve it, fearful that it might have been stolen, and then decided to take a shortcut back by walking over a plank across a narrow gorge. "He must have slipped," the woman told me, "for he fell to his death. I shouldn't have been so upset for the loss of a towel. He was just a little boy."

The Second World War has not yet ended. For years the Polish people were deeply troubled about 10,000 Polish officers who were killed in 1939 and buried in mass graves in the Katyn Forest. The initial assumption was that the German SS troops had perpetrated this hideous crime, but increasingly the evidence, as more and more was uncovered, pointed to the Soviet government. During a visit to

Warsaw in early 1990 Mikhail Gorbachev in a sober ceremony announced that Soviet officials had given the command for the execution of the Polish officers. With bowed head Gorbachev confessed on behalf of the Soviet people and asked forgiveness. Only then, for many Poles, did the war come to some resolution.

Is there any hope for peace and well-being for the nations? Is there hope for today's world? Will past wars never cease to spawn new ones? In the course of 1990 the Two-Plus-Four Conference was held in Germany: the two Germanies and the four allied nations hammered out the terms for the re-unification of Germany. Secretary of State James Baker said in a television interview: "The war is finally over. I believe there is hope for mankind."

But is there hope? We are now living in the final decade of the twentieth century and we sense that good news is bound to be followed by bad. Christians, however, know the power of justice and mercy. They will join hands with all who seek peace. In January 1941 President Roosevelt introduced four propositions to the U.S. Congress. He called them the Four Freedoms. They were freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from economic want, and freedom from fear—four freedoms which, according to Roosevelt, constitute the foundation of a viable civilization. I believe that today again we must do everything within our power to promote these four freedoms for our own nation and for the world. That challenge has now become urgent, and we share it with all people of goodwill and integrity.

But there is a second challenge that we must also see clearly. This challenge is the vision of God's Kingdom. A very remarkable development took place in Eastern Europe and the Balkan states in 1989. Their Marxist regimes had seemed so firmly established, yet they fell. These regimes were not defeated by the power of armies but by a fermentation that began deep in the hearts of individual Christian men and women, one which was nourished by a gathering chorus of prayers. Amid the grim despair that held these nations in bondage, a new hope arose sustained by the vision of individual Christians.

I believe that today, amid the horrendous obstacles that stand between the nations and their well-being, we may take sacred reassurance from what these individual believers have accomplished. Our personal faith, our individual hope, our integrity, and our faithfulness will bring God's shalom to bear upon the nations of the world. Should not we who confess that God's Kingdom is over all be in the forefront when it comes to bringing freedom to the oppressed, justice to the enslaved, liberation to the imprisoned, food to the hungry, possibilities to the hopeless?

Allow me to close with a quotation from the inaugural address of President Havel of Czechoslovakia: "We are living in a ruined moral climate, we are sick morally as a nation. But today, freedom has come, and we make a new confession that Jesus Christ—not Caesar—is Lord. Thus being transformed, we shall transform the nation."

May that be an article in our personal political creeds. May the Second World War not only come to a conclusion in the hearts of millions, but may its conclusion leave a legacy of healing and hope for the generations after us. As we see the plight of the oppressed and the poor we pray earnestly, "Come, Lord Jesus, yes, come quickly, and come to them through us."