

The Good War by Studs Terkel Book

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Introduction: What Terkel Means by “The Good War”

Studs Terkel’s 1984 book *“The Good War”: An Oral History of World War II* is built from interviews with people whose lives were shaped by the conflict. The title is deliberately complicated. World War II is often remembered in the United States as a morally clear fight against fascism, yet Terkel places quotation marks around “The Good War” because the people he interviews remember fear, racism, grief, exhilaration, opportunity, trauma, and contradiction alongside victory. The book is therefore not a conventional military history organized around generals and campaigns. It is an oral archive of memory in which soldiers, workers, internees, survivors, scientists, activists, and civilians describe how a global war entered individual lives. (Terkel, 1984)

The original essay correctly observes that Terkel “has a way of making the past come alive,” but his method requires critical reading. Interview testimony is indispensable evidence of experience, emotion, language, and retrospective meaning. It is not a transcript of the past itself. People forget, compress events, repeat stories they have told for decades, and reinterpret younger selves through later political beliefs. Terkel also chose whom to interview, which questions to ask, what to edit, and how to order the testimony. The book’s power lies not in eliminating mediation but in making ordinary voices central to historical interpretation. (Terkel, 1984)

Oral History as Historical Evidence

Oral history preserves forms of evidence that military records and official reports frequently exclude. A personnel file can identify a worker’s assignment but not necessarily describe the sound of a factory, fear during an air raid, anger about discrimination, or the complicated pride of participating in mobilization. Terkel’s narrators explain what events meant to them, which can reveal social norms and private tensions. Their word choices also show how Americans and others constructed ideas about patriotism, enemy populations, gender, race, and citizenship. (Terkel, 1984)

At the same time, memory changes. An interview conducted nearly four decades after 1945 is shaped by the Cold War, civil-rights struggles, Vietnam, later wars, family conversations, public memorials, films, and the narrator’s own aging. Contradictions between testimony and documentary records should not automatically make the interview useless. The disagreement can become evidence of how memory works. Historians compare oral testimony with letters, newspapers, government documents, photographs, unit records, and other accounts rather than expecting one voice to prove an entire

event.

The Myth of National Unity

World War II mobilized millions of Americans and produced a strong language of national unity. People bought bonds, rationed goods, volunteered, worked overtime, joined the military, and moved across the country for war jobs. Terkel's interviews show genuine collective commitment. They also reveal that the United States was not equally united. Black Americans served in segregated forces and faced discrimination at home; Japanese American families were incarcerated; women entered industries while encountering unequal pay and expectations that they would leave when men returned; conscientious objectors challenged dominant definitions of patriotism. (Terkel, 1984)

Calling the period unified can therefore conceal who had to demand inclusion. The "Double V" campaign sought victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. Labor disputes continued, and social conflict did not disappear because the country faced an external enemy. Terkel's method is especially valuable here: placing celebratory testimony beside critical testimony prevents one national narrative from swallowing every experience. (Terkel, 1984)

The Home Front and Industrial Mobilization

American industrial capacity was one of the decisive elements of Allied victory. Automobile plants converted to tanks and aircraft, shipyards expanded, and millions of people entered defense work. Terkel's narrators describe long shifts, rapid training, new wages, and pride in producing equipment that soldiers needed. Wartime employment transformed cities and accelerated migration. (Terkel, 1984)

The original essay notes that the war "thrived" industry, which is true in the sense that production expanded dramatically, but economic growth came through public spending and emergency mobilization rather than an ordinary market boom. Workers endured injuries, housing shortages, racial conflict, childcare problems, and inflation. Wartime prosperity was distributed unevenly.

The experience also complicates the idea that industry and patriotism were automatically aligned. Companies negotiated contracts and profits, labor unions negotiated wages and conditions, and the federal government intervened extensively. The war economy was a coordinated political system as much as a spontaneous private-sector response.

Women's Work

Terkel includes women whose wartime employment expanded their economic independence. "Rosie the Riveter" became the symbolic image of women entering factories, but women also worked in

offices, laboratories, farms, hospitals, military auxiliary organizations, and many other settings. (Terkel, 1984)

Employment could be liberating while remaining temporary and gendered. Women were often assigned jobs according to assumptions about feminine skill, paid less, and expected to maintain household work. After the war, many were pushed out of industrial positions to make room for returning men. The experience nevertheless changed expectations about capability and contributed to longer transformations in women's employment.

A complete history should also distinguish among women. Black women, Japanese American women, Latinas, Native women, and working-class women faced different opportunities and barriers. The category "women" does not describe one uniform home-front experience.

A. J. Who Worked as a Navy Welder

A.J, who worked as a welder for the navy, says she was motivated by patriotism to get involved in a new line of jobs since men were getting into the army for war. She worked at a Naval Dockyard after studying welding and even returned to the docks after the war before going back home. She recalls that women came to work in trousers, and they were not used to seeing women put on their suits. Most men even complained that women were unsuitable for shipyards. However, this was not easy. It was risky and dangerous. Once, she fell from the deck onto a ramp. "I was hanging on the rail for about 20 minutes. I thought it was more than 20 minutes ... before someone came along." She was relieved by the realization that while working in the docks, you didn't have to stay home all the time worrying; she considered herself to be contributing directly to the war and also learning skills. She worked in Portland when their first ship went down the ways. (Terkel, 1984)

P. H A. Shipyard Worker

The other lady was P.H., who worked at the shipyards in Portland. When she heard about the war on the radio, she was in fear. She wanted the Germans to win. "Well, I didn't think we had a chance." She says that everybody joined the war movement after the Pearl Harbor incident. She also talks of the people who opposed it, "I know there was a big movement in San Francisco, people who didn't believe in it," the communists. She was brought up believing Germans were better than everyone else. Her parents were German. (Terkel, 1984)

P.H. speaks of her readiness to take up any challenge to help in the war. She had fears about the war. "They were asking for white collar workers as well as laborers. At Kaiser, shipyards, all the big manufacturers up and down the coast. A girl I knew well ... we went and applied and they took us right away. No questions asked." She grabbed the opportunity to make more money. "So that's how I ended up working in the shipyards. For three times the money." She started as a pipe fitter and then became a welder. She describes it as a difficult place to work "They had to improvise, had to weld

inside of the hull, even underneath sitting on a life preserver on my wire, doing an overhead weld. I'd hang upside down like a monkey." She did this for three years until the end of the war. "I look back at it with great fondness. And I'm proud I did it." Her works boosted the troops, but she didn't consider herself a hero. (Terkel, 1984)

S. K. A Japanese American Woman

S.K., a Japanese American woman, also tells of her experience during the war. She and her family had become victims of the wartime incarceration policy. The Japans had bombed Pearl Harbor, and Japan was now America's greatest enemy. S.K. had memories of an incident with a child who mistook a "Welcome Japs" sign to mean that Japanese children were welcome. "We'd see newspaper pictures of these Japanese children over in Japan and the caption would always read, 'Little Japs.' So he thought Japs meant children, not Japan. I didn't want to explain it to him." She suffered losses because of the war. Her father and mother were taken away. (Terkel, 1984)

She also compares the experience with that of a German American. "We had a German neighbor who wasn't picked up even though we thought he was pro-Hitler. He was never considered a threat to the country. There was no general camp for German aliens. ... Why were we different?" She felt bad about the relocation and never liked it. "I was never for evacuation the fact that we were American citizens of Japanese ancestry. ... We didn't know what ... " According to her, race contributed to this kind of discrimination. She also relates it to economic competition and fear. She escaped from the camp with the help of a church and moved to Chicago. However, she did not like the city because she came across open forms of racial prejudice which led her to seek to change some of the policies, among other things. (Terkel, 1984)

Japanese American Incarceration

The original essay's discussion of S.K.'s experience should use precise language. Following Executive Order 9066, the federal government removed approximately 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast, most of them U.S. citizens, and confined them in camps. Officials used military-necessity arguments, but later investigation found that racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and failure of political leadership drove the policy. (Terkel, 1984)

Terkel's interview shows the policy at the level of family and identity. A legal category becomes a child's misunderstanding of a sign, the disappearance of parents, and the realization that citizenship did not provide equal protection. The comparison with German Americans demonstrates how racialization shaped who was imagined as permanently foreign.

Memory of incarceration also challenges the "good war" label. A democracy fighting racist authoritarian regimes violated the rights of its own citizens. Recognizing this contradiction does not erase the necessity of opposing Nazi Germany and imperial Japan; it makes democratic self-criticism

part of the history.

A. A Japanese American Internee

A. also tells of similar experiences as an interned Japanese American. He was picked from Manzanar by the United States Army intelligence and sent to India. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima saddened him. "I was saddened when I heard of Hiroshima. I couldn't sit down and rejoice, I was worried got scared, impact of the atomic bomb we didn't know what harm the radiation could do." The realization also meant that their country didn't have to invade Japan. The dropping of the bomb shocked Japanese Americans. A's anger over racism is clear. "The white world is big and around us. It's not smart to hate anybody because you'd be isolating yourself. I have to forgive these people." (Terkel, 1984)

Hiroshima and the Moral Memory of Victory

The atomic bombings are among the most contested aspects of the war's memory. Supporters have argued that the bombs accelerated surrender and avoided a costly invasion. Critics emphasize civilian deaths, radiation, the condition of Japan, and alternative paths that might have ended the war. Terkel's oral-history method does not provide one technical answer to the military debate. It captures the moral shock experienced by individuals who heard the news. (Terkel, 1984)

A Japanese American narrator could oppose Japanese militarism, serve the United States, and still grieve for Hiroshima. These identities are not contradictions. National loyalty does not require emotional indifference to civilian suffering. The testimony shows why historical actors should not be placed into simple patriotic or anti-patriotic categories.

The bomb also changed the meaning of modern warfare by demonstrating that one weapon could destroy a city rapidly and leave long-term radiation effects. Victory in 1945 opened the nuclear age and new forms of fear.

Combat and the Experience of Soldiers

Terkel's soldiers describe experiences that cannot be reduced to strategy maps. Combat involves boredom, terror, weather, exhaustion, friendship, killing, and the constant possibility of death. Veterans may remember pride in the mission while remaining troubled by individual events. (Terkel, 1984)

The original essay focuses mainly on home-front women, but the book's broader argument requires comparison with combat. The factory and the front were connected: a shipyard worker's weld became part of a vessel on which sailors depended. At the same time, civilian patriotic enthusiasm could not

reproduce the direct experience of battle.

Oral testimony is especially important for understanding how soldiers processed killing. Official histories describe successful operations; interviews reveal guilt, fear, numbness, and memories that persisted after homecoming.

Race and the Armed Forces

The U.S. military remained segregated during World War II. Black servicemen fought within a nation that denied equal rights. Units such as the Tuskegee Airmen challenged racist assumptions, while Black veterans returned to discrimination and violence. The contradiction strengthened postwar demands for civil rights. (Terkel, 1984)

Other groups also faced unequal treatment. Native Americans served in large numbers, including code talkers, while Indigenous communities remained subject to federal control. Mexican American servicemen fought abroad while communities encountered discrimination at home. Japanese American soldiers served with distinction even while relatives remained incarcerated.

The war created opportunities for claims to citizenship, but service did not automatically produce equality. Reform required continued organization and political struggle.

Propaganda and the Enemy

Wartime propaganda simplified enemies into recognizable images. Nazi ideology and Japanese imperial violence were real, but American propaganda often racialized Japanese people more broadly than Germans or Italians. This made it easier to imagine civilians as a collective enemy. (Terkel, 1984)

Terkel's interviews reveal how ordinary people absorbed and later reconsidered these representations. A person may remember intense hatred during the war but feel discomfort decades later. Such testimony helps historians distinguish between legitimate opposition to an enemy government and dehumanization of a population.

Propaganda also created idealized images of Americans: the selfless soldier, patriotic woman worker, and unified family. These models mobilized support while excluding experiences that did not fit.

Economic Transformation

The war helped end Depression-era unemployment through massive federal expenditure and military demand. Families experienced new wages, migration, and consumer scarcity simultaneously. Savings accumulated because many products were rationed or unavailable. After the war, pent-up demand contributed to economic expansion. (Terkel, 1984)

This transformation depended heavily on government planning, contracts, taxation, borrowing, and research. The idea that the war proves government or private industry alone creates prosperity is too simple. Public and private institutions were deeply intertwined.

The human cost also matters. Economic statistics cannot balance the deaths, injuries, displacement, and destruction required to produce wartime demand. Prosperity is a consequence, not a moral justification for war.

Science, Technology, and Responsibility

World War II accelerated radar, aviation, medicine, computing, and nuclear research. Scientists often understood their work as essential to defeating fascism. After 1945, some confronted the destructive capacity they had helped create. (Terkel, 1984)

The Manhattan Project became a model for large-scale state-funded science. Its success demonstrated what concentrated resources could accomplish while raising questions about secrecy and democratic oversight. Scientists, military leaders, and politicians did not bear identical responsibility, but technological expertise could not be separated from ethical consequence.

This tension continues in modern research on artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and weapons. Technical possibility does not answer how a technology should be used.

Return Home

Veterans returned to celebrations but also physical disability, psychological distress, changed relationships, and uncertainty about civilian work. The GI Bill expanded education and homeownership for many veterans, though implementation often reflected racial discrimination in housing and lending. (Terkel, 1984)

The public language of victory could make it difficult to discuss trauma. A veteran might believe the war had been necessary while struggling with memories. The absence of contemporary diagnostic language did not mean psychological effects were absent.

Families also had to renegotiate roles. Women who had managed households or earned industrial wages were expected in many cases to return to domestic positions. The end of emergency did not restore the exact society that had existed in 1941.

Memory and Nostalgia

The book was published in 1984, when World War II had become a powerful national memory. Compared with Vietnam, it could appear morally clearer and socially unified. Terkel complicates

nostalgia by allowing narrators to remember both purpose and contradiction. (Terkel, 1984)

Nostalgia can select the ration card, dance hall, uniform, or victory celebration while leaving segregation, incarceration, bereavement, and civilian bombing outside the frame. Oral history brings uncomfortable details back into the story.

At the same time, cynicism can distort memory in the opposite direction. The crimes of the Axis powers were not invented by propaganda, and resistance to them mattered. Critical history should preserve moral distinctions without idealizing the societies that fought them.

Why the Book Matters

“The Good War” changes scale repeatedly. One chapter may address geopolitical violence and another a worker’s clothing or family argument. This movement demonstrates that history is experienced through bodies, homes, workplaces, and memories. (Terkel, 1984)

The book also democratizes the archive. People who would never produce official documents become historical sources. Their testimony does not eliminate the need for traditional archives; it expands the questions those archives must answer.

For students, the text provides a model of source criticism. Each voice should be taken seriously without being treated as universally representative. Agreement among several interviews can reveal a pattern, while disagreement can reveal different social positions or changing memory.

Conclusion

Studs Terkel’s *“The Good War”* is most valuable when the quotation marks in its title remain visible. World War II defeated regimes responsible for aggressive war, genocide, occupation, and extraordinary violence. That moral significance is real. The American experience also included racial segregation, Japanese American incarceration, civilian bombing, gender inequality, labor conflict, grief, and the beginning of the nuclear age. (Terkel, 1984)

The narrators discussed in the original essay—women shipyard workers and Japanese Americans—show how the war created both opportunity and injury. A worker could gain wages and skill, while another citizen lost home and liberty because of ancestry. A Japanese American could serve the United States and mourn Hiroshima. These experiences do not fit one uncomplicated patriotic story. (Terkel, 1984)

Terkel’s oral-history method gives the past emotional immediacy while requiring careful evaluation of memory and selection. The book does not prove that the war was simply good or bad. It asks a more difficult question: how should a society remember a necessary victory without forgetting what the

victory cost and whom the national story excluded? (Terkel, 1984)

References

Terkel, Studs. *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War Two*. Pantheon Books, 1984.