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# Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II

*Michael Bess*

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## CHOICES UNDER FIRE

*"Wise, judicious, eloquent." —Geoffrey Ward*

### MORAL DIMENSIONS OF WORLD WAR II

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#383143 in Books Bess, Michael 2008-03-11 2008-03-11Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.00 x .90 x 5.20l, .83 #File Name: 0307275809416 pages | File size: 35.Mb

**Michael Bess : Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II:

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people found the following review helpful. Borrowed it, then brought it. I first found this book in the library and thought, well why not. I found myself really enjoying the book. It really put another spin on history and I ended up renewing the book 10 times before the library denied another renewal. So, my other choice was to buy it which I did and I don't regret it

World War II was the quintessential "good war." It was not, however, a conflict free of moral ambiguity, painful dilemmas, and unavoidable compromises. Was the bombing of civilian populations in Germany and Japan justified? Were the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes trials legally scrupulous? What is the legacy bequeathed to the world by Hiroshima? With wisdom and clarity, Michael Bess brings a fresh eye to these difficult questions and others, arguing eloquently against the binaries of honor and dishonor, pride and shame, and points instead toward a nuanced reckoning with one of the most pivotal conflicts in human history.

From Publishers Weekly: Bess, who won the George Perkins Marsh prize in environmental history for his last book, *The Light Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France 1960-2000*, challenges the belief that WWII was modern history's most righteous war. Pointing out that governments and individuals at war do not shelve their morality, he cites three areas where moral choices at all levels of power determined the nature of the war. Race was a central issue in Nazi policies of genocide, the mass internment of Japanese Americans and the segregation of English pubs to accommodate anti-black prejudice. Brutality developed after initial shock at air attacks on civilians gave way to acceptance of thousand-plane raids on cities and applause for the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On a more positive note, Bess believes World War II generated a permanent commitment to developing international institutions committed to justice and humanity that rose above the nation-state. While choices in these areas were sometimes clear, he observes that they more often involved compromises, doubt and shame; the challenge was-and is-to choose compassion and cooperation above all. Highlighting both the enduring presence of free will, and the paradox that justice and ambiguity coexist, Bess reminds us that strong moral choices are always possible. Author Tour. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From Booklist: Excluding ardent pacifists, Americans generally view World War II as the "good war" in which the goals of defeating Nazi totalitarianism and Japanese militarism eliminated moral ambiguities. But Professor Bess insists that in a war fought for moral purposes, the moral ambiguities of specific governmental or individual actions are sharpened. In this fascinating but discomfiting work, he unhesitatingly tackles some of the moral dilemmas presented by the war. How did the racism prevalent in American society undermine the moral justification of our cause? British and American opposition to Japanese expansion in Asia is examined within the context of European imperialism and exploitation. Could the bombing of civilian centers be justified on the basis of saving the lives of our military personnel? Can the necessity of defeating the Nazis be morally squared with an alliance with the equally monstrous regime controlled by Stalin? These, of course, are difficult questions, and those who prefer pat answers will have little patience with these ruminations. Yet the strength of this book is that it forces us to acknowledge and confront them.

Jay Freeman: Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved. "Wise, judicious, eloquent." —Geoffrey Ward "A stunning and brilliantly written case for using history as a filter to examine the great traumas of our more recent past, adding a moral compass to see the true roots of war and violence in our time." —Rocky Mountain News "Meticulous, unsparing, and a brilliant case study in the complexity -but also the necessity--of coming to moral judgments even in a time of "total war." —Sanford Lakoff, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, University of California, San Diego "A tough-minded, courageous, ultimately optimistic book, sure to spark debate among readers interested in the history of warfare and the future of our planet." —The Tennessean