

Introduction to
Robyn Kachelmeyer Gage and Lori Derck Widzinski's
For Home and Country: Oakfield, New York During World War II

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The sheer number of books and articles that have been written about the Second World War is daunting – indeed, some scholars have estimated that there are about 128,000 books written about Adolf Hitler alone. This is symbolic not only of the enormous amount of scholarship pertaining to a war that touched the lives of countless millions around the world – but, just as importantly, about how much of a focus there has been on leaders, national and military policies, etc. Nevertheless, there still remains much to be said about ordinary people – and the untold number of towns, villages, and neighborhoods touched by the war. This is precisely where Robyn Kachelmeyer Gage and Lori Derck Widzinski conduct their research and writing about the impact of this global conflagration on a small town in rural New York – Oakfield.

Their book is an important narrative that captures a relatively new trend in the historical writing regarding World War Two – the effort to tell the story of the war in a manner that is less romantic and more true to the realities faced by men and women both in and out of uniform during this period. The point is to honor this generation by depicting their lives in a way that is as close to the truth as possible. Gage and Widzinski therefore humanize the lives in, and the community of, Oakfield while avoiding the trap of creating a mythology that might make for good reading – but which would remain, nonetheless, poor history.

This humanization begins with their gripping descriptions of those who lost their lives – young men such as John M. Mikolajczyk, who was brutally put to death in a Japanese prisoner of war camp only eight years out of Oakfield High School. They also remind us of the fate of Lyle L. Churchill, an airman killed in action against the Germans at the age of twenty-six. Such stories are not designed to make us feel good and hence to run the risk of romanticizing the war. Instead,

such stories exude the tragedy of lives cut short, and hence result in a great tribute to both the deceased and to their families by recreating rich lives that had the misfortune of appearing at a moment of international adversity.

In keeping with this growing trend among historians to construct a narrative about World War Two as close to reality as possible, Gage and Widzinski also spend time exploring the German and Italian prisoners of war found in Oakfield during these years. This has the consequence of achieving two objectives. One of these is the effort to depict what the presence of enemy troops meant for people in Oakfield whose family was overseas fighting the societies represented by these prisoners. Secondly, their consideration of the prisoner of war camps has the effect of once again stressing what the war was like for ordinary people. Farm boys from Germany and Italy now meet farmers in Oakfield – the world conflict is rendered more visible because ultimately it is about regular people caught up in a storm not of their own making.

For Home and Country is an example of how this new trend in the historiography of World War Two can look like when the focal point is local. Their work reminds one of what Kenneth D. Rose did on the national level in 2012 in *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II*. Like the earlier 1995 work by Stephen G. Fritz, entitled *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*, Rose ushered the reader into the daily life of obscure soldiers who were typically civilians in uniform motivated by the desire to survive in the midst of worlds they could have scarcely imagined only a short time before. Gage and Widzinski strive for the same kind of historical portrayal in their book. As Fritz told the reader in *Frontsoldaten* when he quoted Alois Dwenger, a German soldier on the Russian Front in 1942:

I am often angered by the hollow accounts from incompetent pens. Recently I read a report of an attack where . . . they recounted so many details and in the process forgot the everyday life of the war, the actions of simple soldiers . . . In the gray dawn (the soldier) crawls into the dugout, frozen through and

dead tired; it is crowded, damp, loud, half-dark; the lice torment. I believe that true heroism lies in bearing this dreadful everyday life.

Like this newer historical writing – captured in the scholarship of historians such as Rose and Fritz – *For Home and Country* remind us of the realities long ignored by many earlier historians of World War Two. Gage and Widzinski illustrate that the image of this war is indeed undergoing a radical change, and their use of local history is indicative of just how important a focus that sets aside national concerns can be in enriching our understanding of this conflict. They are providing a great service to the people they are writing about, for they are articulating – indeed, giving a voice to people who otherwise are scarcely remembered outside of their families. Gage and Widzinski should be congratulated on achieving the goal they set for themselves – that of honoring the sacrifice of the people from Oakfield through their reconstruction of the details of lives so affected by the Second World War. As I have endeavored to stress, Gage and Widzinski are part of a growing body of historical writing whose very focus is testimony to the lives of people worthy of research – and remembrance.