Description:
War, the institutions created to wage it, and the social classes that controlled those institutions have played a central role in history for as long as we have had an historical record. In the late 18th century war morphed into something new and much more destructive as the French Revolution created the concept of the "Nation in Arms" and the Industrial Revolution armed that militant nation with weapons of steadily more destructive power. This process culminated in 1939-45.
The course will focus on this last spasm of industrialized destruction. It destroyed European empires, created a global American one, led to deep and profound social and cultural changes and still, 75 years on, casts a long shadow over us. The course will be as much about what the war changed and created as about how it was waged. Looking back at it all in long retrospect tells us much about how our world came to be what it is.

What we will do.

This is a seminar conducted by reading and discussion. Normally at this point there would be a list of readings, some of which would be course texts. However the course is about World War II which touched every part of the globe except Antarctica. The bibliography is comparably gigantic. There is no completely satisfactory general survey for precisely this reason (the latest try at one, Richard Overy’s Blood and Ruins comes in at 878 pages of text plus 77 of small type footnotes/bibliography—and already reviewers are pointing out omissions). Churchill’s published wartime papers comprise eight massive volumes averaging 1,000 pages each--and that is not all of his wartime papers.

In the face of this bibliographic mass, I have decided to treat the subject topically, using the first several course meetings to talk about various themes--e.g., leadership, war aims, home fronts, women and the war, etc., and providing backup bibliography on each subject. That should launch you on your own exploration of some facet of the struggle, which will lead inexorably to....

The Course Essay. Minimum 15 pages in length exclusive of bibliography and footnotes (use any known footnote form). Due on 5/17/22. You must discuss your topic with me on or before March 22, our last class before spring break.

If you want to do some preliminary reading, I recommend Richard Overy’s Why the Allies Won, a good if limited survey of certain topics, quite readable and available in paperback from Amazon ($16). There is now a Kindle edition of Overy’s Blood and Ruins at $14.99 which you may want to think about getting. The book is likely to be the go-to survey of WWII for some time to come. If you don’t use/like Kindle the earlier Overy survey mentioned above will still do
nicely. (There is no paper edition of Blood and Ruins, and the cloth-bound edition is about $50, which is too much.) And, yes, Overy writes a lot.

Significant class dates:
2/8/22—First class
3/22/22—Deadline for discussing proposed essay topic with Professor Callahan
5/17/22—Essay due; last class meeting.