A momentous and global war, World War II had far-reaching consequences. A subject of significant historical importance and of intense interest for many, there remains a nearly endless supply of new works devoted to World War II. In this deluge, Boston University military professor Cathal J. Nolan's The Concise Encyclopedia of World War II stands out for its global treatment, but it also contains several weaknesses. A two-volume set, this reference work contains encyclopedia entries, maps, and a select bibliography.

World War II encompasses myriad historical approaches, and Nolan's encyclopedia focuses primarily on military aspects while also addressing diplomatic and political subjects. Although narrowly focused on military matters, Nolan's work provides a remarkably even coverage of military issues for each country involved in the war. While other volumes of this size tend to have a slight Western or United States focus, Nolan's work excels in its comprehensiveness and contains many entries not commonly found in similar works. This work's success in achieving broad global coverage is its greatest strength. In addition to its outstanding worldwide account, this set provides more than twenty detailed yet easy-to-understand maps depicting troop movements across nearly all fronts.

A useful work for those seeking basic information about military issues during the war, Nolan's set has several notable weaknesses. Although a concise encyclopedia, this set is more similar to a desk reference or a subject dictionary. While Nolan's encyclopedia strikes for succinctness and often succeeds, many entries offer exceedingly limited information and are often a single paragraph in length. However, not all entries conform to the principle of conciseness, such as the "Barbarossa" entry, which spans nearly twenty-one pages. A major weakness of this two-volume set is the notable task of a suggested readings list for the majority of entries. Only lengthy entries such as "Barbarossa" and the "Sino-Japanese War" provide suggested readings. Nolan does supply the reader with a beneficial select bibliography in the second volume. However, a more useful approach would have been to also include relevant sources at the end of each or nearly all entries.

This encyclopedia does provide the reader with sound information on the military and political happenings of World War II. A well-researched reference work, it would certainly be useful for the casual seeker of World War II military information. However, as a reference work for a research starting point, this publication contains several deficiencies that render its usefulness less than desirable. With the omission of suggested readings for most entries, this work is not useful for readers wishing to further explore a given topic.

Reference works on World War II abound, and a recent comparable work, the Encyclopedia of World War II, 2-Volume Set by Alan Axelrod (Facts on File, 2007) serves as a good alternative and includes suggested readings for most entries. Spencer Tucker's five-volume set, Encyclopedia of World War II: A Political, Social, and Military History (ABC-Clio, 2005), continues to be the standard for World War II encyclopedias and, although more expensive, remains a better value. Although Nolan's accessible set includes military information that may otherwise be difficult to find, the dearth of suggested readings makes The Concise Encyclopedia of World War II best suited for high schools or medium-size public libraries.