

Armageddon in the East: Russia's Crucial Thrust Surprises the Nazis

Soviet Blitzkrieg: The Battle for White Russia, 1944 by Walter S. Dunn, Jr., Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, Colo., 2000, 249 pages, \$55.00, hardcover, ISBN 1-55587-880-6.

In July 1944, the Red Army launched a massive, German-style blitzkrieg attack against Hitler's Army Group Center in what was the biggest Eastern Front battle of World War II. Historian Walter Dunn now presents the fascinating details of the stunning Russian victory in *The Battle for White Russia*.

Dunn is an expert on the war on the Eastern Front. He has written two earlier historical works on the subject, *Hitler's Nemesis: The Red Army 1930-1945* and *Kursk*. Using recently declassified Soviet orders of battle, as well as German and Russian unit histories, Dunn smartly recreates the details of the planning, training, and execution of the remarkable Soviet breakthrough offensive that smashed 50 German divisions and advanced 300 kilometers in just ten days.

In early 1944, the Allies asked Stalin to conduct an offensive on the Eastern Front to coincide with the Normandy landings, in order to tie up German reserves in the east and prevent the shifting of German forces from one front to the other. Stalin eagerly complied, but his reasons, as usual, were more Machiavellian than cooperative. White Russia, occupied by the German Army Group Center, was selected for political and military reasons as the target for the Russian offensive. Stalin wanted to occupy as much territory as possible to ensure Russian hegemony in eastern Europe.

Dunn's research and presentation reveal much about the strategic position of White Russia and the geopolitical chess game Stalin played with the lives of his soldiers. Best, however, is Dunn's vivid portrayal of Russian preparations for an offensive that would hurl two million men in 180 divisions against the 800,000 Germans who defended in terrain totally unsuitable for the maneuver of huge Soviet tank armies. At least that is what the Germans thought, and their vulnerable defenses reflected that error.

The destruction of Army Group Center relied on eight elements in the Soviet plans: local superiority, deception, surprise, leadership, timing, use of terrain, training, and technology. The Soviets had learned much from the Germans and now they would use the blitzkrieg against the invaders.

Most of White Russia is swamp and dense forest, with few roads and fewer railroads. The Germans never dreamed the Russians could or would launch a major offensive in such inhospitable terrain. They incorrectly

assumed the Russians suffered from the same lack of mobility that they did. Of course, that is exactly why the Russians picked that area for their offensive. The Russian plan was so carefully drawn, so meticulous, and so successful that the Germans never suspected what awaited them in the mists and fog of the swamps and forests.

Deception, surprise, and local superiority were complete, with single German infantry regiments vainly trying to stop entire Russian tank armies. In one case, a Tiger tank battalion and an artillery battalion were sent to blunt the penetration of the whole 5th Guards Tank Army, a rather futile gesture indeed. The speed and violence of the Russian blitzkrieg crushed the defenders and sent the survivors into a rout. The few German reserves could not react fast enough to counter the onrushing waves of tanks, assault guns, artillery, and truck-mounted infantry that poured through huge gaps in the defensive lines. The German response was panicked, desperate, and hampered by indecision and bad decisions.

After ten days of amazing success, the Soviet offensive ground to a halt, but not due to any German countermoves. As usual, logistics fuels any plan and the Russians had outrun their trains. They would go no further until supplies could reach the forward units.

Dunn's work here is superb as he tells of the German and Russian generals trying to command in combat, solve problems, and make decisions with each side facing unique, fluid situations. This is a well-researched and vividly told story, both entertaining and informative, as well as containing excellent lessons for any professional officer.

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The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished by Stanley Sandler, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1999, 330 pages; hardback \$42.00, paperback \$19.00.

Historian Alexander Bevin, in his book *Korea: The First War We Lost*, claimed that the United States "lost the Korean War." Nothing could be further from the truth, as Stanley Sandler asserts in *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished*, his new book on this much forgotten though very important war fought immediately after World War II — a decade before the Vietnam War in 1965.

Sandler asserts that during the Korean War, there were, in fact no winners nor losers, with the result being the stand-off that still exists today. This book provides a clear,

concise, and well-balanced account of the Korean War, from its origins in the post-World War II settlements between the United States and the former USSR to the battlefields on land, on sea, and in air over North and South Korea, as well as the Red Chinese intervention. Finally, there is an account of the oftentimes tortuous peace negotiations at Panmunjon that took nearly as long to conclude as the shooting war itself.

No Victors, No Vanquished is chronologically written, with a brief history of the two Koreas and that peninsula's tortured history in the twentieth century, first under Japanese and later Soviet occupation. Divided at the end of World War II between the United States and the USSR, Korea unknowingly became the first test of the West's firm resolve to halt communist expansion in Asia. The detail Sandler provides on the North Korean Army's (NKPA) invasion of South Korea and the Allies' retreat to the Pusan Perimeter is well-balanced. It gives a fair assessment of all sides, and is critical of the United States Army's lack of preparedness to meet this onslaught. U.S. forces were hindered by their focus on occupation duty in Japan and the cuts in defense made by Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson. Determined to exceed President Truman's goals in cutting defense spending, Johnson virtually stripped the United States Army's combat power through his mismanagement of the Pentagon. This was, in fact, the reason cited by President Harry S. Truman for firing Johnson, a long-time political supporter and friend. There was, as we know today, sufficient blame to go around, specifically on the part of the President, for these same cutbacks in defense spending. It was Truman who claimed "The buck stops here," insofar as government spending, particularly on defense, was concerned. In any case, when the U.S. went to war, it was with a far different and weakened force than the one that defeated the Axis during World War II.

Nonetheless, when rushed to the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. Army fought a valiant rear-guard action as it attempted to slow the NKPA. The author provides a fresh interpretation of both Task Forces Smith and Kean, and their almost suicidal missions in slowing the North Koreans as they pushed ROK and U.S. forces to an ever-shrinking perimeter around the port city of Pusan. Sandler gives credit where credit has long been overdue to the bravery and the tenacity of the American soldiers who fought the NKPA during these ominous days. They bought the United Nations enough time to rush in reinforcements to strengthen the foothold that both these task forces had tenaciously held onto during the first month and a half of war. In retrospect, the author writes, "The battle for the

Pusan Perimeter was a damned close thing," that almost led to an evacuation from the Korean peninsula.

At the head of the United Nations effort was General Douglas MacArthur, who could probably share some of the blame for the Army's unpreparedness to meet the NKPA invasion. Sandler is critical of MacArthur's style of leadership and his pomposity, which sometimes clouded his ability to make sound judgments. As other recent works on the Korean War now indicate, while General MacArthur made some brilliant decisions throughout his military career, including the highly successful and daring landing at Inchon that reversed the course of the early Korean War, his style of leadership and inability to follow orders later on had "disastrous results" in the prosecution of the first eight months of the war. Sandler provides a well-balanced assessment of MacArthur's generalship during his role as commander-in-chief of all U.N. forces in Korea until his removal in April 1951 by President Truman.

Perhaps the strength of Sandler's *No Victors, No Vanquished* is the fact that it is well-balanced. It discusses all the services and is not just Army-centric. The author lavishes praise on the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade under Brigadier General Edward A. Craig, as well as the fighting abilities of the leathernecks, many of whom were reservists and veterans of World War II. Despite General MacArthur's known contempt for the Marines, a dislike that was rooted in a WWI public relations fiasco after the fighting at Belleau Wood, he nonetheless counted on their mastery of amphibious operations to launch the counterstroke at Inchon and the eventual liberation of Seoul. Sandler attributed the ability of the Marines to their commitment to training at both the basic and unit levels, as well as their battlefield leadership, which often provided the edge in battle.

The author likewise praises the airmen and the sailors who fought in Korea. He credits the air campaign with "breaking the back" of the NKPA during its long retreat northward following the breakout from the Pusan Perimeter and the simultaneous landings at Inchon.

As for the role of the U.S. and other navies, the author concludes that U.N. naval power made it possible to bring to the peninsula the troops and equipment needed to save the Republic of Korea. He argues that the very presence of such a large U.N. naval contingent possibly dissuaded the communists from challenging the many ships that sailed largely unmolested up and down the Korean coastlines. The naval force provided excellent platforms for the aircraft that provided close air support to U.S. and U.N. forces and bombarded enemy troops, railroads, and logistical bases. Ships and submarines likewise transported U.S., British, and ROK commando forces to launch devastating raids against NKPA and Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) along North Korea's coastline.

As for the roles of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), Sandler provides ample evidence that Soviet dictator Josef Stalin was the real "ringmaster" of the communist war effort in the South. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung knew that Stalin would see an opportunity to challenge the United States' position in Asia and thus persuaded him that the time was ripe for an all-out offensive to unify the Korean peninsula under his rule. As for the Chinese intervention, the author provides a concise account of the PRC's decision to intervene on the side of the NKPA, which China claimed, then and now, was for "purely defensive" reasons. Sandler provides very little insight, however, into Mao's decision to go to war in October 1950. Nonetheless, he provides fair coverage of the Chinese intervention and its devastating effects on the U.N. plans for reunification of the two Koreas and its fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir in December 1950.

No Victor, No Vanquished likewise gives ample coverage to the U.N. and South Korean forces involved in the war, one of the best features of this book. He describes the different armies sent as part of the United Nations force, as well as the day-to-day improvements of the ROK forces as the war dragged into 1951 and 1952. The author also looks at the efforts at negotiating a cease-fire, and touches on the psychological operations war for the "hearts and minds" of all the armies involved. The Korean War was, as Sandler's book proves, a modern war in every sense of the word. The methods used here would be repeated during the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War a decade later.

Several faults warrant mention. In his attempt to tell the whole story, Sandler neglects some of the more important political aspects of the war and how they influenced the fighting. Sandler might also have included a chapter on how the Korean War changed the U.S. Army's outlook and preparation for future limited wars. And far better maps might have given the reader a better insight into the progress of the war as it dragged on. Despite these shortcomings, this book is recommended as a text for instructors in military history courses and for professional military history libraries. Sandler has taken a difficult subject and has written a very good primer on the war. This book comes highly recommended for military historians, and tells the story of an important war that is no longer forgotten.

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Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War by Mark Bowden, Penguin Books, New York; 1999, 392 pp., \$13.95, ISBN 0-14-028850-3.

The Battle of Mogadishu was one of America's least explored yet most relevant battles

in recent history, and it is given an outstanding treatment here by author Mark Bowden. The technique of weaving different perspectives within the story allows insight into tactics, character, and combat not normally found in a military history. The author realistically captures the language, morale, and lifestyles of the individual soldiers that are so familiar to anyone who has served. Perhaps what makes this account even more readable and enjoyable for anyone with a military background is the ability to imagine how easily such a situation could occur in your own unit.

Beginning with the initial air assault to capture the aides of Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the book introduces the men on both sides. We get to know the background and personality of each soldier, so that when a Delta Force soldier is killed, we relive it not only from the viewpoint of the soldiers around him, but also from the point of view of the Somalis doing the shooting. The book places you within the fight, and you feel a sense of loss that a friend and colleague is being killed, not just a name on a page. Not just elite soldiers are introduced here; the story of the "cook platoon" rescue convoy reminds all in uniform that all of them are primarily soldiers.

The author describes the accidents and confusion that add up to the "fog of war" so often described in historical accounts. He follows the battle from the viewpoints of numerous participants — those on the initial assault, those in the first ground convoy, the aircraft crews overhead, the men at the two helicopter crash sites, and the soldiers in several other ground convoys trying to rescue the embattled Rangers and Delta Force operators trapped in the maelstrom of the battle.

Mr. Bowden, a newspaper reporter, uses to good advantage the technique of the cross-referenced personal interview, in the style of military historian S.L.A. Marshall. But he also uses his access to devices that Marshall could have only dreamt about — recordings of the actual radio conversations and copies of the real-time video taken from overhead. Bowden ties all of these aspects together to make a near-seamless chronicle of the events. The author includes a collection of tactics, techniques, procedures, and lessons learned that should be of interest to soldiers as well as policy makers of all ranks and positions. These insights vary from those any soldier can use, such as staying away from walls in a city fight to avoid the "bullet funnel effect," to the modern day limits of military power as a foreign policy tool. Mr. Bowden's book will serve as the definitive treatise on a battle that briefly entered the world's stage only to disappear from view just as rapidly. This book provides a current battle primer that should be required reading for soldiers of all ranks and branches.

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