Clark on Black, 'The World at War, 1914-1945'

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While reading The World at War, 1914-1945, by the British academic Jeremy Black, readers will get a strong impression of what British universities are trying to achieve with their history courses. Certainly, there are specific events of the 1914-45 period that are named, of which more later, but what stands out is the author’s willingness to foreground the methods British universities use to study history. This book explains the different levels on which war operates: strategic, operational, and tactical. Also, Black explains how history itself is influenced by national, geographic, economic, governmental, and individual views. Having experienced university in the company of eminent military historians, I find this approach to be familiar. Black is not merely telling history but is also being honest about the origins and influences that weigh upon it. For students studying history, war studies, or any of the joint honors courses at a British university, such an approach is useful. For those who have left or never experienced late 2010 British university practices, this approach will be unfamiliar. Prospective buyers of this book should be aware that this book is not a brief narrative covering thirty years of crashes and bangs. No pictures aid the reader. Here is a slim book but one packed with theory.

Aside from its focus on the balanced approach to studying history, which was being taught as standard university curriculum, this book examines key themes from the two wars. In the examination of the First World War it is the British learning process that comes to the fore, specifically the Hundred Days campaigns of 1918. Likewise, in the Second World War a British learning process is identified as peaking in 1944. As evidence for this claim, Black explains that in 1944 the German army lost a third of its strength (p. 215). In the Second World War, amphibious assaults became successful due to a tried and tested method. Such a method was honed in the Pacific, Mediterranean, and European theaters. Operation Overlord, the most important of all the sea-land assaults, was a success, born of enormous amphibious capabilities and intelligence gathering. In tying both wars together, Black argues, “Training was the factor most underrated in discussing Allied competence, and for each world war” (p. 206). It is difficult to find fault with a conclusion such as this: British training, particularly in the “Battle Schools” of the Second World War, was excellent but is overlooked constantly.[1]

Black encourages the view that the German brilliance in the sphere of tactics, so often lauded as the be all and end all of military success by television documentaries and historians who should know better, was responsible for their defeat. In both world wars, the German tacticalization of strategy was short-sighted. German soldiers with the right equipment, good training, and strong morale were
no match for coalitions comprising oil-producing nations with global empires and global mind-sets. Black goes on to suggest that this small-mindedness on the part of the German leadership had other effects. Victory was no longer possible for the Germans in 1943. The Russians tried for a second Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1943, but rather than sensibly curtail this bottomless pit of German materiel and manpower, Adolf Hitler’s genocidal plan for the East meant that the fighting had to continue.

Unusually for a book called The World at War, the finest writing comes in the chapter dedicated to the interwar years. For those unwilling to visit a local library or buy any of the books that concern the interwar years, Black’s three-chapter synthesis offers just enough detail. Some large topics, such as the economic depression that affected the United States, and subsequently the world, are not given enough space. However, this is only a slim book with a lot of ground to cover. One area that is well covered is the US preparations for a two-front war. Long before Pearl Harbor was attacked and the Germany first policy was signed, the US had been planning, designing, and building the arsenal of democracy. Another detail that was of particular interest concerned the naval arms race before the Second World War. Unlike the race that preceded 1914, prior to 1939 the world’s navies had to contend with treaties and limitations. A degree of cunning was therefore required. The German construction of armored cruisers, better known as pocket battleships, was, according to Black, “exploiting the discrepancy” between the limitations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, which prevented the Germans from possessing naval guns larger than eleven inches, and the Washington Naval Treaty, which limited the other major navies to eight-inch guns for cruisers (p. 132). So while the Royal Navy equipped cruisers with six-inch and eight-inch guns, the Germans had a marked edge in range and weight of shell from their eleven-inch guns.

Black also confronts new scholarship with his own arguments. Working outside of a university department, James Holland has expounded the theory that large Allied armies were slow and ungainly, thanks to their preponderance of materiel (The War in the West, A New History, volume 1, Germany Ascendant 1939-1941 [2015] and Normandy ‘44: D-Day and the Battle for France, A New History [2019]). In contrast, the Wehrmacht had the freedom to operate quickly because they had so little to organize. Where Black disagrees is which armed force operated with the most freedom. In Black’s view, “the relatively small size of the American combat arm increased its mobility” (p. 221). Yes, the force required extensive and complicated logistical support, but the freedom enjoyed by the motorized infantry, armor, and artillery was better than every other belligerent. Black also finds time to challenge some arguments that have always appeared two-dimensional: the oft-compared size of the US and Portuguese Army in 1939, for example. Black reminds readers that in terms of air power, Portugal could not match the new B-17 bomber.

Having shown the stronger elements of this book, it is opportune to mention some parts that are not as strong. This is not a narrative history. The First World War, interwar years, and Second World War occupy their own sections of the book, and each of these is broken down into separate chapters focused on land, sea, and air. Such an approach is beneficial for students needing a specific idea for their next seminar discussion or paper, but its thematic organization differentiates it from histories written by Andrew Roberts (Masters and Commanders: The Military Geniuses Who Led the West to Victory in World War II [2008]), John Keegan (The First World War [1998]), or Katja Hoyer (Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire 1871-1918 [2021]). Unlike these books, here the reader must assimilate the ideas as they go along but can just as well rely on the conclusions that end each part.
In such a small book, it is understandable that interesting ideas that have been raised cannot be fully explored. This is a shame. Black writes that for the British Army, “tactical capability, in turn, made it easier to implement operational planning” (p. 223). While this sounds like a good thing, Black misses the reverse. For example, the overly ambitious plan for Operation Market Garden would never have been attempted if the British had not set a precedent through their tactical and operational success in “swanning” out of Normandy.

Black has written a survey that draws together university scholarship from English-language sources. Some aspects are mentioned all too briefly and the entire book reads closer to a textbook than a summer holiday read. However, the argument that Black makes is useful for understanding this dreadful period of history. Having won vast empires through willpower and luck, the German and Japanese armed forces prepared to defend their territory. Not only did the Axis enjoy the benefit of being the defender, but their leaderships were also totalitarian, which facilitated the fight to the bitter end mentality. It is testament to the truly awesome reserves of brain power, resources, military equipment, morale, and popular fortitude that the Allies possessed that they could overcome such an obstinate enemy. Popular belief would have the Axis as the irresistible force and the Allies withering before them. Instead, Black is championing something different: the Dominion, United Kingdom and Empire troops (DUKE), the United States, and the assorted nations of the world who confronted the Axis were the irresistible force, and the Axis could not live up to their own propaganda as immovable objects.

Note


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