North on Black, 'Tank Warfare'

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Tanks dominate the public perception of twentieth-century land warfare in the same way knights dominate our view of the Middle Ages and smart bombs symbolize the information age. Movies like *Patton* (1970) and, more recently, *Fury* (2014) brought images of confident and swaggering tankers to the masses while reinforcing stereotypes about German technical prowess. Tanks provide great visuals for the news, exemplified by a Tiananmen Square protestor standing in the way of a column of tanks and the marine recovery vehicle assisting with tearing down Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad. Military historians are also subject to obsessions with tanks, especially the decisive role in the European campaign of the Second World War. In *Tank Warfare*, the prolific historian Jeremy Black delivers a comprehensive and globally informed analysis of the development and employment of armored forces in the twentieth century, providing nuance to long-held beliefs and, most importantly, correcting common misconceptions about their role.

Black surveys how different nations, with different cultures, incorporated the innovative technology of armored vehicles into their strategic, operational, and tactical concepts. He intentionally parallels his book *Air Power: A Global History* (2016) on the emergence of the airplane on battlefields during the same period, demonstrating how each brought potential and achievements as well as limitations and defeat. The theme that dominates the book under review is that technology is not deterministic. Tank design is by nature a tradeoff between speed, armor, firepower, and reliability. The tank alone never was decisive, but when paired with the right strategy and used in concert with other arms, armored vehicles restored mobility to the modern battlefield. Tanks also play an essential role off the battlefield, as a symbol of power by state actors and means for industrial powers to exert international influence through arms sales.

Black relies primarily on secondary and published sources, and most of the narrative is known and could be found in other books. However, the strength of *Tank Warfare* is in Black’s ability to weave the entire history from many different perspectives across one hundred years into one relatively condensed source. By doing so, Black challenges traditional tank narratives by placing them in context. His two strongest chapters disassemble the myth of the German blitzkrieg and emphasize the necessity for tanks to operate as part of a combined arms team. His book also offers an excellent list of selected readings of the most influential authors on tank warfare. There are places throughout the book where the reader may get bogged down by Black’s relentless barrage of details or find deeper analysis in other works. Nevertheless, they are unlikely to find one source that covers the breadth of history better.
Black’s book is organized chronologically, with each chapter including sections on technological developments, details on the employment of tanks, and broad overviews for nations not featured in the main narrative for the chapter. The first chapter covers the early attempts during the First World War, followed by two chapters on the 1920s and 1930s interwar year experimentation. These chapters explain how each country debated which characteristics were the most important, highlighting how no one design is best in all types of terrain or missions. The fourth and fifth chapters, covering World War II, are the strongest and offer the most thought-provoking insights. Black effectively argues that the German army did not begin the war with a well-developed doctrine of blitzkrieg but instead took advantage of the weakness of their opponents and learned from experience to develop the effective tactical integration of armor with field artillery, tactical air support, and infantry. Tactically focused, they ignored operational and strategic level planning, which would be their downfall once their opponents improved. Likewise, Black recasts the Allies’ victories in Europe in 1944 not as a demonstration of the technological power of the tank but as the effective employment of combined arms teams using sound operational and strategic plans. The following two chapters examine how the tank remained relevant during the Cold War conflict despite the focus on nuclear warfare, not necessarily on the battlefield and more as a symbol of technological capability, ability to intimidate, and a means of influencing countries through the arms trade. The final chapter looks into the future, predicting that the race between protection and firepower will hinge on developing non-armor means of protecting the tank and the increased use of uncrewed land vehicles. Black believes, despite claims of its imminent demise, the tank will retain a role on the future battlefield.

_Tank Warfare_ is recommended for any student of land warfare in the twentieth century. The broad scope and inclusive efforts provide a starting point for detailed research, assisted by Black’s chapter notes and selected reading. The broad nature will leave some readers wanting more, while others will find his detours into details distracting, but the book redeems itself through efforts to place developments into the global and temporal context missing from other efforts.


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