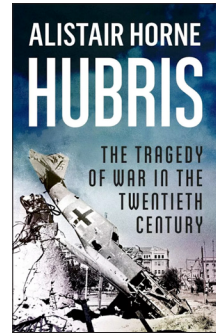


Book Reviews

Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the Twentieth Century



By Alistair Horne

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Introduction

We are running out of first class historians – as opposed to journalists – with meaningful experience of combat or indeed any form of conflict. Arguably only two remain, Michael Howard and of course Alistair Horne. Horne's works have inspired and advised since the early 1960s. His seminal account of Verdun '*The Price of Glory*' (1962) remains the leading work on the greatest battle in Western European history. '*To Lose a Battle*' (1969) is said to have been closely studied by Israeli generals – specifically Ariel Sharon – and to have influenced their tactics in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Perhaps his best known work, and that is saying something, is '*A Savage War of Peace*' (1973), once again still the go-to work on the Franco-Algerian War. In the dark days of 2006, Sir Alistair was invited by President George W Bush, who had read the books on Henry Kissinger's recommendation to discuss Iraq and how to deal with Arab insurgents.

With a background like that when you open a book by Horne, you can assume that you are in for an authoritative and interesting read. With his latest, '*Hubris*', you can be assured that as well as having those qualities it is also very enjoyable. Focussing on the early 20th Century '*Hubris*' looks at five campaigns, or more accurately, five series of battles where Hubris played a

role. Horne is too subtle a writer to overstress the 'Nemesis' that inevitably follows. This formula of studying failure is nothing new. After all, every battle won is also a battle lost by one's opponents. There is no shortage of studies outlining the reasons for the disasters (also Soviet victories) of Stalingrad and Kursk. One could name many, many other examples of events – some rather recent – which loom large in the 'military failure' literature.

'Hubris' is unusual for at least three reasons. First, for its selection of campaigns. Yes, there is Moscow 1941 – very well-covered quite recently by, amongst several others, Rod Braithwaite. However, aside from naval enthusiasts few might have come across a study of the battle of Tsushima where Japan's pre-Dreadnought battleships smashed Russia's fleet in 1905. Even those naval historians would have much to learn about the rest of the major battles in the Russo-Japanese War – particularly in Korea. All of them were new to this reader. These are very well-covered; indeed they prove to have provided important lessons for the commanders in the Korean War of 1950-1953. Horne looks again at that later campaign. Indeed his summary of the course of that war is excellent, the best available.

Similarly, experts on armoured warfare, or the life of Marshall Zhukov will have heard of the Battle of Nomonhan in 1939 where, this time on land, Soviet Russia decisively defeated Japan. This battle intimately influenced that Battle before Moscow in ensuring that the Japanese Army understood that there was little mileage in an invasion of the USSR. Indeed it may be argued that Nomonhan fought in 1939 played a part in the endgame of the Second World War in that it placed Japan on the defensive with respect to Russia; some argue that what the Japanese government really feared in 1945 was a *Russian*-dominated Japan.

This raises the second almost unique quality of '*Hubris*'. Each of the five campaigns studies are well done. One would expect no less. However, each is linked both explicitly and implicitly to the next and the subsequent war. These links are not forced, but neither are they obvious. The close connection between Nomonhan and Moscow has already been mentioned. Less obvious are the links between Tsushima (1905) and Midway (1942). These skeins of connections pervade *Hubris* and render it almost a work of art as well as a fine work of history. In other words, there is a great deal more to the book than an apparently random or 'capricious' – Horne's word – collection of campaign summaries.

Finally, there is the personal element. Alistair Horne's life has spanned all the major conflicts of the late 20th Century. It has also encompassed sometimes close friendships with some of its key players. Once again, this personal element is not overplayed. It is however perhaps unconsciously present, as when the author mentions the throwaway comment of a friend of his who was in the German Army of 1941 before Moscow, or the relative comforts of an M4 Sherman and a T34 both of which as a young officer in the 1940s he had experienced. History, as the author says in his prologue, requires historians to 'scan backwards and forwards, as well as sideways'; in other words no battle exists in isolation. '*Hubris*' is a supreme example

of this approach, with all the conflicts chosen having links with each other. Each of the campaign studies in this book is a masterpiece in miniature. Taken together, they represent an excellent and fascinating book that will illuminate and entertain anyone with an interest in military history.

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