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H-Net Reviews

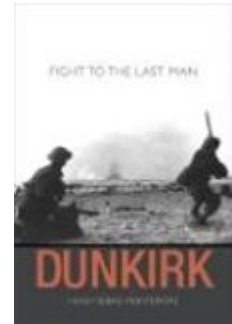
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hugh Sebag-Montefiore. *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. xvii + 701 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02439-7.

Reviewed by James V. Koch (Old Dominion University)

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Definitely a Fight, But Not to the Last Man

Hugh Sebag-Montefiore correctly notes that multitudes of books already have been written about the evacuation of the British and French troops from Dunkirk in May and June 1940. He argues, however, that these accounts generally have neglected the crucial role of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in making this escape possible. He agrees that great credit must go to Adm. Bertram Ramsay, the Royal Navy, and almost one thousand small boat owners who actually moved the beleaguered troops from France to England. Nevertheless, he asserts, without the BEF, there would have been no evacuation, or at least a much smaller number of troops would have escaped from the jaws of the Wehrmacht. The evacuation is a well-examined incident. What distinguishes this volume from its many predecessors, however, is the inclusion of hundreds of first-hand, sharp-end-of-the-stick reports by members of the BEF.

Sebag-Montefiore, who trained as a barrister and whose brother, Simon, is a highly respected historian of Russia and Joseph Stalin, jumped into the crowded World War II history market in 2000 with an esteemed book on Enigma code-breaking. His current book is a lengthy, first-rate account of the Dunkirk evacuation that focuses intently on an undeniably bitter defeat, one that was soon to transmogrify nearly into a victory in the British imagination. This “miracle of deliverance” (as Winston Churchill famously put it) boosted British morale. Yet, it would not have been possible without the efforts of the BEF and the willingness of many on its roster to die, or become prisoners of war, in order to save their comrades.

Sebag-Montefiore traces how the 338,226 individuals were evacuated from Dunkirk between May 26 and June 4, 1940. British ships rescued more than 200,000 additional Allied troops from other French ports such as Cherbourg and Brest, but as he notes, these later evacuations have never penetrated the public imagination. John Vereker Lord Gort, the head of the BEF, was one of the evacuees and soon came to be regarded as a hero despite the disaster that had afflicted the BEF under his command. Churchill had to restore a sense of perspective to the tragic, but strangely uplifting situation, with a further admonitory aphorism: “Wars are not won by evacuations.” Even so, along with the Charge of the Light Brigade, Dunkirk has become one of Britain’s favorite military disasters.

The accounts of the events leading up to the evacuation are detailed in the book, especially where British troops are concerned. We learn of a British officer blowing his fox-hunting horn as a signal for his troops to fire; a private who lost an arm in the battle ending up scrubbing floors after the war because he was pushed out of his old job; the Duke of Northumberland waving his ash stick to urge his troops forward, but in so doing being killed because he rashly exposed himself to fire; a popular and sometimes incorrigible Welsh Guards officer bringing two greyhounds with him to France and later winning the Victoria Cross posthumously. Often, these are stories that have not been told before. First-hand testimony pervades the 496 pages of history and analysis, supplemented by an interesting section entitled “What

Happened to ... after the War? ”, plus a set of twenty-one detailed maps, statistical appendices, and ninety-five pages of admirably discursive and useful footnotes. One might contest Sebag-Montefiore’s interpretation of events, but there is seldom doubt about the sources of his information.

Sebag-Montefiore is hard on the French, whom he scores repeatedly for pusillanimous fighting, inadequate training, and bad decision-making. Indeed, the author concludes that the evacuation and surrounding events “were the consequence of mistakes made by French generals and politicians” (p. xi). He lambastes French leadership for not reacting properly to the Mechelen incident on January 10, 1940, when the Belgians retrieved from a crashed German military plane a copy of what on that date was the German invasion plan for western Europe. He argues that the French should have concluded that the Germans would abandon what was in many ways a rewrite of the World War I Schlieffen Plan and in its stead develop something new. This is one of several places where he plows a bit of new historical territory, in this case by means of discussing previously overlooked German, Belgian, and Czech files on the issue. Related to this issue are newly obtained interviews relating to Abwehr Colonel Hans Oster’s warnings to the Allies about the forthcoming German invasion. Ultimately, both the French and British could not eliminate the possibility that the Mechelen crash was altogether too convenient and therefore constituted an elaborate hoax. Their inability to decide also led them to discount Oster’s pointed warnings of the impending German attack.

Other historians have covered most portions of the May 1940 Anglo-French-Belgian-Dutch debacle in detail, notably Gregory Blaxland from the British point of view and Karl-Heinz Frieser from the German side.[1] Worthy of note here is that Sebag-Montefiore’s explanation of the famous German “stop order” outside of Dunkirk does not coincide with Frieser’s more detailed research, which backstops the argument that it actually was Adolf Hitler rather than his generals who bears primary responsibility for the most important stop order—without which the miracle at Dunkirk never would have occurred.

Sebag-Montefiore skewers Churchill for his potentially disastrous, changing, and sometimes contradictory military advice, and notes that within the space of a few hours, Churchill sometimes serially ordered the BEF to stand on defense, and counterattack, and withdraw. He points out that the vacillating and politically sensitive prime minister actually sent portions of the 1st Canadian

Division to France via Brest even after the Dunkirk evacuation, when it was abundantly clear that most British troops in France either were going to be killed or made prisoners of war. The author’s presentations of British War Cabinet discussions on such matters, and the cabinet’s explorations of the requirements of British honor, along the possibility of peace overtures, are detailed and illuminating.

Nor surprisingly, therefore, Sebag-Montefiore easily demonstrates that both BEF commanders and their French counterparts received confusing and sometimes conflicting messages from the British command on fighting, evacuating, and negotiating. Some of this confusion was due to the inevitable fog of war, of course, but other instances occurred because a portion of BEF troops had been placed under French command. However, for a variety of reasons (including inferior and frequently elusive French leadership), the British chose not to obey French orders. While Sebag-Montefiore exhibits little sympathy for the French, it is small wonder that the French were embittered by the events surrounding Dunkirk, though almost 140,000 French troops were evacuated along with approximately 200,000 British.

Representative of the author’s “let’s get the story directly from participants” approach is his coverage of the Le Paradis and Wormhout massacres perpetrated on British POWs by the Waffen-SS. As a rare Wormhout survivor reported, “they made us turn around so we were actually shot in the back ... the shot went right through my body. I thought I was dead and I suppose I passed out” (p. 360). Another remembered, “the Germans began throwing grenades in. I had my right arm shattered by one of the first explosions” (p. 359).

I do have an important reservation about the book, however, and it relates to a significant fundamental: its title, which, however stirring, is quite misleading. Whether the “last man” in question was Belgian, British, or French, there was relatively little fighting to the last man in western Europe in spring 1940. Only in a few cases did members of the BEF, Sebag-Montefiore’s focus, fight to the death. In reality, approximately 300,000 BEF members escaped to Britain (from all ports, including Dunkirk) and another 30,000 surrendered, while only 11,010 died. These numbers reveal that fighting to the death was seldom. A succession of “stop” orders issued to the Wehrmacht saved the BEF, not the BEF fighting to the last man. Sebag-Montefiore’s actual presentation of the May 1940 events confirms this stance, but the title chosen for his book does not. If, however, Sebag-

Montefiore actually wished the title to convey a sense that the BEF fought to its last man in France in 1940, then unfortunately the evidence does not support this view. Even though the gallant and productive Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire regiment (the “Ox and Bucks”) was instructed to fight to the last man, it did not do so. All things considered, that probably was a good thing.

Sebag-Montefiore set out to illuminate the sometimes heroic contribution of the BEF to the Dunkirk evaluation and succeeds in doing so. Nevertheless, if one is looking for dramatic new interpretations of the 1940 battles,

this is not the book to purchase. Even so, the author’s clarification and spotlight on the role of the BEF are both welcome and appropriate.

Note

[1]. Gregory Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk: The Story of Gort’s Army* (London: Kimber, 1973); and Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005). First published as *Blitzkrieg-Legende: Der Westfeldzug 1940* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995).

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