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Review of Willmott, H.P., *The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of the Second World War*

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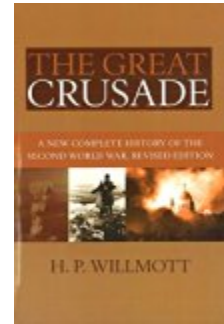
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H. P. Willmott. *The Great Crusade: A New Complete History of the Second World War*. Revised edition. Dulles: Potomac Books, 2008. xiv + 505 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59797-191-1.

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Debunking of Myths?

The first edition of *The Great Crusade* (1989) was a fine, comprehensive, single-volume history of World War II. The revised edition is even better, though readers should be aware that this is a military history of the war that usually focuses on decision-making and activities at the operational level and above. The author sometimes speaks of individual fighting divisions, but almost never about individual soldiers. This work is thus not the place for the reader to discover the tales and yarns of individual soldiers. Those who hope to grasp what it was like to be a Marine storming the beach at Tarawa, or a German civilian in Dresden in February 1945, should look elsewhere. H. P. Willmott gives considerable attention to the broad political and economic motives of warring countries and ample time to the analysis of the thinking behind major military decisions. Nevertheless, individuals who view history through the lens of the trinity of race, class, and gender will also emerge disappointed. Race is considered as it applies to the Holocaust, German and Japanese expansion, and the occupation policies of those countries. But, class and gender hardly rate a mention. The bottom line: *The Great Crusade* is not a social history of the war. Similarly, Willmott makes no attempt to replicate the anecdotes and stories that leaven the contributions of historians such as John Keegan, or his one-time student, Antony Beevor. His concern lies with the overall sweep of events and their import, not with individual reactions and stories.

Willmott does have a few axes to grind, but he candidly enunciates them. He is critical of the “great men”

theory of history; he believes it is important to provide the reader with a balance of perspectives held by the major participants and he states, “I must admit to a contempt for that popularly accepted by pernicious myth of German military excellence” (p. xi). He is not afraid to swim against the tide, either, especially in his analysis of the European theater. He takes issue with Gerhard Weinberg’s view that the Russians deliberately halted on the outskirts of Warsaw in 1944, thereby condemning the Polish underground to destruction.[1] He argues that more German divisions (for example, those involved in the spring 1941 Balkans invasions) could not have been absorbed easily in the Germans’ June 22, 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union and hence would not have contributed to immediate increased German combat effectiveness. He opines that Germany’s repulse in the Battle of Britain “had no effect upon Hitler’s decision to attack the Soviet Union in 1941” (p. 110).

The Great Crusade seldom minces words. Willmott describes Pearl Harbor, when all things are considered, as a Japanese defeat. In his view, the Wehrmacht was consistently outfought and out-thought from Stalingrad to the end of the war. He argues that Erich von Manstein’s famous 1943 riposte to the Soviets at Kharkov has been overly praised. Bernard Montgomery’s tactics often imitated those of the Soviets in their reliance upon numerical and firepower superiority. The RAF was on the edge of defeat after its costly March 1944 Nuremberg raid. A de facto truce between the Japanese and both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Xedong persisted for long periods of time

in China. With similar bravado, the author states that the Union's blockade and strangling of the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War is a direct analog to U.S. strategy vis-à-vis Japan in World War II. Japan and the United States both wished to end the war before the Soviets could enter, but couldn't get the job accomplished. Most of the war was fought after the outcome already had been determined. It is not possible to pick out a turning point in either the war in Europe, or in the Pacific. Such views (and there are many more) make this history both stimulating and sometimes challenging.

On occasion, Willmott offers conclusions that undermine his own position, as when he offers the judgment that the Wehrmacht exhibited "a technique, initiative and flair at both tactical and operational levels that enabled German ground formations to outfight consistently superior enemy forces—at least until 1944" (p. 136), even as he argues that German military excellence is a "pernicious myth" (p. xi). Apparently he discounts the work of Trevor N. DuPuy and others, which suggests that the typical German infantryman was approximately 25 percent more effective than the comparable British or American.[2] An apparent contradiction also emerges between his derogation of the "great men" thesis and his observation that "the European war outlasted its author by nine days" (p. 449).

Given Willmott's thesis concerning the absence of real turning points in the war, it is not surprising that his coverage of critical battles such as Moscow, Pearl Harbor, Midway, and Kiev is lighter than one sees in other comprehensive histories. He also asserts that economic strength ultimately was the critical factor in deciding the war, but does not even mention the work of Mark Harrison or Adam Tooze in his bibliography.[3]

Given these decided stances and the problems that some readers may find with them, we should ask what the work does accomplish especially well. First, Willmott makes one think and rethink one's views about what really happened in the war and why events occurred as they did. Second, drawing on the pathbreaking work of

David M. Glantz and others, he gives significant attention to Soviet war thinking and Soviet military maturation over the duration of the war. His is not the Germanocentric view of events that frequently has colored histories of World War II. Third, he does supply "critical balance" (p. xi) to the perspectives of the combatants. Fourth, he elucidates important, but otherwise obscure, events such as the compromising capture of the SS *Automedon* in November 1941 and the prophetic Total War Research Institute study of August 1941 performed by the Japanese. Fifth, Willmott often buttresses his conclusions with generous data, more so than any comparable comprehensive history. Sixth, depending upon their tastes, of course, readers may find attractive his penchant for stating his assessments forthrightly. He seldom hedges his conclusions with probabilistic statements or counterfactual possibilities. By contrast, in his well-received 1,178-page history of the war, Weinberg sometimes proffers the view that more research is needed on a topic before we can reach a definitive conclusion.

I recommend *The Great Escape* as a university textbook and I back this judgment by using it as my primary text when I teach a course on the history of World War II. True, Willmott serves up more than a few controversial points of view and he chooses not to cover several critical topics. Nevertheless, the book is highly readable, well documented, and provides an excellent springboard for discussion. Would that more prospective textbooks were able to fulfill the same criteria.

Notes

[1]. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2]. Trevor N. Dupuy, *Numbers, Predictions, and War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979).

[3]. Harrison Mark, ed., *The Economics of World War II: Six Powers in International Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Viking, 2006).

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