

of the American Dream. So—here we are. To study bad taste is to look in the national mirror. These authors averted their eyes from the big picture, and blinked at the most revelatory implications of bad taste.

But one good thing about their *Bad Taste* is that, though they omitted Oprah Winfrey, Kitty Dukakis, and Phil Donohue, the dust jacket does feature a picture of Jane and Michael Stern.

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The Key to Victory

by Alan J. Levine

Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War
by John Ellis

New York: Viking;
643 pp., \$29.95



John Ellis, a well-known British military historian, has made a major contribution to our understanding of the nature of World War II with an unflattering reappraisal of the effectiveness and leadership of the Allied forces. His views are not always just, but he raises issues that, while not totally ignored, have usually been confronted only on a piecemeal basis by other historians. It is the merit of *Brute Force* not that it uncovers things that are entirely new—though it sometimes does that too—but that it creates a new way of looking at things.

Ellis presents two arguments. First, that Allied superiority in industrial strength and at least potential military force, rendered an Axis military victory impossible, or nearly impossible, at least from the point the United States entered the war. Indeed, while many people, including Winston Churchill, have regarded Pearl Harbor as the true turning point of the war, Ellis strongly implies that an Axis victory was never in the cards at all, although he does not explicitly formulate this idea. Ellis marshals considerable evidence to show that, contrary to widespread belief, the British were never close to losing the Battle of Britain, nor were the Allies close to losing the Battle of the Atlan-

tic. The available German air and sea forces were just too small to secure victory in those crucial engagements. More doubtfully, he argues that the Nazis never had any chance of winning the Russian campaign.

Ellis's main thesis, however, is that after the tide of war had swung firmly in favor of the Allies, their poor tactics and grasp of the conduct of operations made the war far longer and costlier than necessary. The Allies smashed their enemies by "brute force"—primarily massive firepower, rather than imaginative maneuver and tactics. Industrial strength was the key to victory. Of the many critical battlefields, he points out, Detroit was not the least significant. That insight would not have startled anyone in the 1940's, but its truth has since been obscured by the cults woven around some Allied leaders, and, sadly, by the fact that Detroit is not what it once was.

There is plenty of justification for Ellis's strictures on Allied tactics and leadership in the field; as Lord Alexander once admitted, the Germans were "quicker" than the Allied ground forces at just about everything. The West-

ern armies, in general, were slow, inflexible, and unimaginative at all levels, while the British especially were hampered by poor tank tactics and failure in securing cooperation between different arms. The Soviets were even worse, addicted to crude, repetitive frontal attacks and a senseless disregard for losses. Nor were the top Western commanders outstanding. Ellis is, if anything, particularly harsh with his own country's leaders, expressing genuine anger at Sir Arthur Harris and his insensate persistence with the policy of area bombing of German cities in 1944-1945. Field Marshal Montgomery, once widely regarded by the British as a second Wellington, comes off almost as badly. Ellis speaks of his "distrust of maneuver" and "baleful influence" on operations. But Montgomery's many (and amply justified) American critics will not be pleased to find that George Patton does not come off all that much better. Ellis allows that, unlike his British *bête noire*, Patton was clever at exploiting breaks in the enemy front, but not so good at creating them or at actually destroying enemy forces. In this case, and some

BRIEF MENTIONS

KNUT HAMSUN: SELECTED LETTERS

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Like Strindberg, Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun struggled all his life against the provincial limitations of being a writer in a generally unknown Scandinavian language, and his affection for Germany, which continued through World War II and for which he was to be branded, like Pound, as mentally "impaired," can perhaps be explained by the desire of a man to be remembered in what was and is, for better or worse, the most culturally powerful country in Europe.

Born Knut Pedersen in 1859 to a poor tailor and farmer (he took his penname from his uncle's farm of Hamsund, where he grew up), Hamsun was largely self-taught and self-created. If these letters are any indication of what took up most of his time, he was also tirelessly and perhaps necessarily self-promoting. But he was talented, too, and these letters cover the years in which he wrote some of his best books: the powerful and autobiographical novel *Hunger*, the wonderful *Pan*, and *Mysteries*. Hamsun also spent several of these years (1882-84 and 1886-88) in America, in Wisconsin, Minneapolis, and Chicago, and a good number of the letters here were written in English, specifically those to his German publisher, Albert Langen. For as his editors note, despite Hamsun's great sympathy for Germany, it was a country he never knew and a language he never learned to speak.

Many of these letters are about money, or the lack of it, but they are valuable for the occasional glimpse one has of the great figures of his day, and for the insight they give to a very talented writer, and one who deserves greater attention and appreciation in this country.

—Katherine Dalton

others, he may be less than just. It is true, however, that Patton and other Allied generals usually enjoyed a crushing superiority over their opponents in the offensive phase of the war. Yet, with few exceptions, their operations amounted to pounding the enemy to a pulp and forcing him back. The Allies repeatedly failed to block German retreats even in very favorable situations. Montgomery's failure to cut off Rommel's retreat from Alamein to Tunisia, the delay in closing the Falaise gap, and the failure to block enemy evacuations across the Strait of Messina and the Scheldt, are all cases in point.

Nevertheless, while Ellis's views are generally well-founded, he is not immune to the vices of overstatement and one-sidedness, and, occasionally, of inaccuracy. He does not cover, or slides over, some cases where the Allies did well despite inferior strength—such as the siege of Malta, Midway, Guadalcanal, and the first stage of the Battle of the Bulge. He unduly plays down the Italian role in North Africa and Sicily, thus somewhat inflating the Allied superiority in those campaigns. While his treatment of Bomber Command's campaign against Germany is broadly correct, it contains a number of minor factual errors. He eagerly cites the strong criticisms of the Allied armies' performance made by historians like Russell Weigley, which refer to the earlier stages of the 1944-1945 cam-

paign, but not the estimates by the same men that the U.S. Army, especially, was performing far better in the last stages of the war. The same is true, to some extent, of the Soviets. Ellis cites F.W. von Mellenthin's grim description of Soviet tanks blundering around in 1942, but merely comments that later on Soviet tank commanders acted with "more conviction and dash." Mellenthin, by contrast, insisted that by 1944 the Soviet armored forces were "a highly mobile and keenly edged tool, handled by daring and capable commanders." Allied performance, if never as professional as that of the Germans, exhibited more improvement over time than he allows.

There is a curious gap in Ellis's study of the war. While stressing Allied superiority in production on one hand, and operations and tactics on the other, he shows a curious reluctance to examine critically Allied grand strategy, save in making an unconvincing criticism of the Americans for launching a dual drive across the Pacific instead of attacking along a single axis, preferably in MacArthur's theater. (Ellis holds a mildly favorable view of MacArthur, although he wrongly blames him for the foolish attacks against bypassed Japanese forces launched by the Australians in 1945.) This view is unconvincing, because supply considerations, and the availability of aircraft carriers, favored a Central Pacific drive once the naval balance was clearly in

the Americans' favor. That offensive afforded a quicker way to get across the enemy's supply line to Southeast Asia, and obtain bases near Japan, than an attack based in the Southwest Pacific. It must be admitted, however, that it is almost refreshing to see a reasonable treatment of MacArthur's career, one unmarked by the ideological resentments that have been all too apparent in most recent American appraisals of the man.

Ellis strangely refrains from discussing the wisdom of a number of questionable strategic choices such as the decision to land in Sicily instead of Sardinia—although, as Eisenhower and Mountbatten pointed out at the time, the latter island was a better avenue of approach to the Italian mainland. Nor does he question the decisions to land in southern France on the one hand, and to continue the offensive in Italy after August 1944.

Moreover, while John Ellis is eloquent about the brutality, slaughter, and sheer misery involved in winning World War II, the tenor of some of his criticisms of Allied generals suggests that he has not entirely outgrown a romantic view of what can be expected in battle. His ideas of success, and what can reasonably be expected in war, sometimes suggest exaggerated expectations of what generalship can achieve. Decisive victories with lopsided losses, successful battles of encirclement, and triumphant pursuits of defeated enemy forces are particularly favored subjects for military historians, but are simply not that common in war, even with highly skilled commanders.

Such criticisms, however, should not obscure the fact that *Brute Force* is in many ways a remarkable book. They are, in fact, necessary because this work will almost certainly become a classic of military history. It would be unfortunate if its minor defects and exaggerations gain acceptance, along with its basic theses—theses that do not make for self-congratulation, or pleasant reading, but that are largely true.

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LIBERAL ARTS

FISHER AMES ON CITIZENSHIP

We have absurdly and presumptuously considered our condition as citizens, not as a state of probation for the trial of our virtues, but the heaven where their indolence is to find rest, and their selfishness an everlasting reward. We have dared to suppose our political probation was over, and that a republican constitution, when once fairly engrossed in parchment, was a bridge over chaos that could defy the discord of all its elements. The decision of a majority, adopting such a constitution, has sounded in our ears like a voice saying to the tempestuous sea of liberty, thus far shalt thou go, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed.

—*Boston Gazette*, July 19, 1804