



2011-013

David Downing. *Sealing Their Fate: The Twenty-Two Days That Decided World War II*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009. Pp. xv, 368. ISBN 978-0-306-81620-8.

Review by Larry A. Grant, The Citadel (grant.198@osu.edu).

David Downing opens *Sealing Their Fate* at sunrise on 17 November 1941, on the deck of the Japanese battleship *Nagato*. On that Monday morning, the *Nagato* carried Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto to the sprawling anchorage of the Japanese First Air Fleet in Saeki Bay off the island of Kyushu. There the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack spoke to a group of officers assembled on the flight deck of the flagship *Akagi* before sending them on their fateful voyage to awaken the sleeping giant. Twenty-two days and three hundred pages later, the book closes with the result of the Japanese fleet's voyage. The book's dust jacket tersely summarizes Downing's subject: "In just three weeks, from November 17 to December 8, 1941, the course of World War II was decided and the fate of Germany and Japan was sealed." Within those temporal boundaries, Downing's account ranges freely from "from snowbound Russian villages to the stormy northern Pacific, from the North African desert to Europe's warring capitals, and from Tokyo to Washington" in pages populated by a "host of ordinary soldiers, sailors, and airmen" as well as "the political and military figures whose decisions brought about the war's dramatic engagements" (front flap).

Downing is well-equipped to write this sort of popular military history. Though he started his career as a journalist for rock magazines, publishing his first book, *Future Rock*, in 1975, he has expanded his scope to encompass adult fiction, political-military history, modern culture, and juvenile nonfiction. His well-received John Russell thrillers¹ have led reviewers to compare him to authors like Alan Furst and John Le Carré. His action fiction also includes many stories written under the pseudonym of David Monnery. Reviewers have praised Downing's young-adult nonfiction for its clear and concise explanations of such complex topics as genocide, apartheid, communism, capitalism, democracy, fascism, the Great Depression, and terrorism. This very prolific writer even has an atlas to his credit.

Writers of popular fiction have often ventured into military history by tapping into the inherently dramatic works of traditional "drums and trumpets" historians who focused on great military leaders and their armies or their political equivalents. More current military studies typically take a multidisciplinary and multidimensional approach to the experiences of mud soldiers and citizens in a broader social and cultural context. Downing follows the latter trend in *Sealing Their Fate*. He combines high-level views of governments and military staffs with the front-line perspectives of soldiers and others in the combat zone. Using this framework, he weaves together material from each major participating nation, theater of war, and branch of service. His chapters are collages of conversations and narratives from cabinet rooms to foxholes around the world, assembled to tell a day-by-day story.

Many other writers have similarly concentrated on the daily chronology of wartime turning points. John Lukacs, for example, follows such a blueprint in his *Five Days in London, 1940*,² though on a much smaller stage. Compared to his more intimate and detailed account, Downing's broad, transcontinental perspective poses a daunting challenge. His solid writing skills supply many entertaining passages, but the scene sometimes shifts so frequently or abruptly among the many characters and settings as to leave the reader momentarily disoriented. For example, on pages 134-35, the narrative bounces from North Africa to the Mediterranean, and thence to the South Atlantic. Touching on Dutch Guiana for a single paragraph, the tour ends in Cordell Hull's State Department offices.

1. The first in the series, *Zoo Station* (NY: Soho Pr, 2007), is set in Berlin on the eve of World War II.

2. New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999.

As a writer of thrillers, Downing well understands the need for a steady drumbeat of action leading to an exciting climax, but tension can be particularly hard to achieve when even moderately informed readers know the story's outcome. Downing often sustains suspense through a technique more familiar to novelists than historians. At one point, for instance, he refers to a passage in Ian Kershaw's biography of Adolf Hitler³ that has Joseph Goebbels asking the Führer in late 1941 if he still believed in victory. Kershaw quotes (and Downing reproduces) Hitler's reply that he had believed in victory in 1918 as a blinded corporal and had more reason to believe in 1941 than in 1918. Downing then introduces a bit of latent tension between Hitler and his loyal henchman: "Goebbels refrained from pointing out that the half-blinded corporal's belief had proved mistaken" (88). If this thought passed through Goebbels's mind, it is not clear how Downing knows, since he uses no archival or other primary source materials. Quotations (without page citations) are taken from secondary sources including published diaries, memoirs, and biographies; thus, Downing buttresses his account by drawing on (without comment) such controversial sources as Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier*⁴ and Count Galeazzo Ciano's self-serving diaries.⁵

In Downing's characterization, Hitler is a shadowy figure, popping onto the stage to deliver a line or two before exiting until his next cameo. Similarly, two long passages on Hermann Göring focus on his art collecting activities (246, 299) but devote little space to the Luftwaffe's efforts during the final push on Moscow or the resupplying of Gen. Erwin Rommel in North Africa, tasks Göring cannot have completely ignored however much art he plundered in this three-week period.

With so much ground (and water and air) to be covered, there is, to be sure, hardly room for nuanced and detailed character portrayals even of central figures, but Downing makes it clear that he finds all the wartime leaders generally contemptible: "There is far too much deference accorded by historians to political and military leaders, most of whom ally average intelligence to above-average doses of less desirable human attributes. The history of these twenty-two days is replete with stupidity, incompetence, short-sightedness and evil in high places, and remarkably deficient in wisdom, simple competence, far-sightedness or human empathy. Finest hours were thin on the ground" (330).

Downing's portrayal of the wartime leadership recalls the controversial labeling of First World War generals as "donkeys" because of the human costs of their misguided tactics.⁶ He writes near the end of the book that

The political leaders exercised no moderating influence on their military commanders. The Axis and Japanese leaders set their losing wars in motion, set its brutal tone, sacrificing millions of other nationals and eventually millions of their own. They made the essentially heartless mistake of believing that whole peoples could be subdued indefinitely by intimidation and violence, when all the evidence available to them actually suggested otherwise. Stalin was as reckless with lives in war as he had been in peace, Roosevelt made sure that nuclear science would be applied, first and foremost, to weapons of mass destruction, and Churchill gave his full backing to the strategic bombing policy which served as a precedent for so many later atrocities. Small wonder that the baleful legacy of the Second World War still lingers on (331).

The problem is that Downing simply makes such bald claims, including the fantasy notions that FDR ought (presumably) to have been pursuing peaceful uses of nuclear power and that Stalin's peacetime purges were no different from his wartime blunders, without having previously argued for them in the first three hundred pages of his text. His criticism of the strategic bombing campaigns fails to take into account their context: the aerial destruction of German cities did not occur in a vacuum, though one may disagree over the necessity then and the meaning now of such tactics (especially their causal links to later atrocities). Some recent historians see in the revisionist criticism of strategic bombing a tendency to extend the status of victim to Germans who otherwise supported the genocidal National Socialist regime. Downing indulges in

3. *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (NY: Norton, 2000).

4. NY: Harper & Row, 1971.

5. *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1946).

6. See Alan Clark, *The Donkeys: A Study of the Western Front in 1915* (London: Hutchinson, 1961).

other implausible asides, as when he likens the “multilateral civil war” provoked by the German invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941 to the “fate that Iraq would suffer sixty-two years later” (147). But he springs most comments of this sort on the reader in the epilogue of an otherwise fairly conventional narrative.

As we might expect of the creator of a successful action hero writing for a general audience, Downing has fashioned a lively narrative. But, except for its final chapter, *Sealing Their Fate* is merely another in a long line of books that mostly rehash long familiar stories.