



2013-052

Jeremy Black, *Avoiding Armageddon: From the Great War to the Fall of France, 1918-40*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012. Pp. xxii, 304. ISBN 978-1-4411-5713-3.

Review by Larry Grant, The Citadel (lgrant@sc.rr.com)

The usual characterizations of the period between the World Wars rely on a few touchstone subjects to create a narrative of an inevitable (and tragic) progress from French battlefield 1918 to French battlefield 1940. These include, among others, the retributive peace process, American withdrawal into isolation, the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War interventions, Nazi rearmament, appeasement, and the failure of European collective security. By highlighting these events between two cataclysmic bookends, historians trace military developments from one war to the next largely without leaving the European continent.

Such accounts argue that rapid adoption of certain military technologies born during the First World War, notably armor and aircraft, and the creation of innovative doctrines brought Germany its initial successes against old enemies early in World War II. Whether from wishful shortsightedness or parsimony, the British and French did not pursue the military advances of the interwar period with sufficient vigor, which left them ill-equipped to meet the German onslaught in 1940.

In *Avoiding Armageddon*, prolific historian¹ Jeremy Black (Univ. of Exeter) rejects the narrowly Eurocentric view of the interwar period as little more than a pause in a thirty-year German project to conquer Europe. He maintains that this interpretation is not only “unconvincing as an account of the variety of the past” but also offers “scant preparation for the nature of conflict across the world since the collapse of the Soviet system in 1989-91” (xi), preparation that might have yielded helpful guidance, had leaders studied the relevant lessons of the full spectrum of interwar conflict.

Black believes the lessons of history have a universal character that makes them germane to later times as well as their own: “a period in the past may be more relevant, indeed far more relevant, for the present than more recent periods. And so for the inter-war years” (xi). This insight is not especially remarkable. After all, historians, professional and armchair, have often uncovered (some might unkindly say cherry-picked) historical events to support their arguments. But Black sees the interwar period as an especially rich and untapped field where historians may find enlightening antecedents of modern warfare, if they would only search outside the usual paradigm.

The first four chapters treat the 1920s. Chapter 1 reviews “The Aftermath of the Great War.” Chapter 2 discusses “Imperial Warfare,” while chapter 3 addresses “Warfare in the ‘Third World’ in the 1920s,” and chapter 4 covers “Learning Lessons” of the First World War as part of “a utilitarian procedure designed to ensure greater success in the next war” (86), not an attempt to discover how to end warfare altogether.

The next three chapters either span or divide the interwar period according to their subjects. Chapters 5 and 6 survey “Naval Developments” and “Air Power” across the entire period. Chapter 7, “The 1930s: Economic Context,” focuses on the watershed calamity that still marks the divide between the 1920s and ‘30s, the Great Depression. The final half dozen chapters of *Avoiding Armageddon*, summarized below, examine the escalating conflict in the Far East between Japan and China in the 1930s and revisit the empires of the western powers and the third world before shifting to Europe in anticipation of events to come there.

Black’s synopsis of the time between the wars is particularly helpful in two areas. First, in chapters 8, “War in the Far East,” 9, “Conflict and the Western Empires in the 1930s,” and 10, “The Third World in the 1930s,” he highlights events of the period not normally studied by those with an institutional, political, or technological focus on Europe, Japan, and the United States. An example is his concise account in chapter 10 of the routinely overlooked Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (1932-35).

1. The Library of Congress Catalog lists eight books (!) authored and two edited for the year 2011 alone.

Second, his study of the different evolutions of military establishments according to national needs exposes the failure of the standard picture of the interwar era to explain how initially similar European armies had, by the end of the Great War, begun to diverge until events in the late 1930s forced them accept the possibility of another war between the most industrialized nations. Here the difficulties encountered by the British are especially instructive.

Immediately after the war, Britain returned its attention to its empire, accommodating new territorial additions, tending to existing holdings, and adapting to postwar austerity. While Germany had no imperial commitments, for Britain, "Imperial conflict and capability were important in the 1930s, not only for what occurred, but also for what they entailed about the ability to act elsewhere.... In particular, the issues of prioritization between commitments and the linkage of challenges both posed serious problems. The British concern with empire reflected the experience of the Great War when the empire had provided crucial support, in men, money and supplies, in Europe. Thus, the empire was both a source of weakness, through over-extension, and strength" (199-200).

British preoccupation with problems outside Europe suggests an explanation for one interwar touchstone: appeasement. "Far from there being any tradition of appeasement, military-diplomatic policies involved competing tasks and were, therefore, an issue of prioritization...." While it is reasonable to claim that circumstances of the moment dictated appeasement, we may question Black's conclusion that "A lack of clarity about allies and enemies made it difficult for Britain and other powers to produce effective strategic plans" (199). Certainly nothing concentrates the mind like a clear-and-present danger, but competent staff planning demands only experienced personnel, adequate intelligence, and a little imagination. Given German provocations, by 1936 or 1937 any reasonably capable general staff should have been anticipating more serious threats to come.

Black also uses episodes from the 1920s and '30s to inform his reflections on later conflicts. For example, during their campaigns in China, Japanese troops used brutality to try to break Chinese morale. Racial hatred not only prevented them from seeing the futility of this policy, it obscured "an emerging immoral and callous attitude within the Japanese military and ... [a] failure to provide any other answer to the quagmire of its own making" (174). Black shows the corrosive effect this legacy continues to exert on current Sino-Japanese relations in a section entitled "The Memory of War" (175-79).

This broader focus continues in chapter 11, "Politics and the Military in Europe of the 1930s." Germany's descent into totalitarianism in response to social chaos, economic distress, and the failure of civil institutions during the Great Depression is often treated as the central event of the period. Black shows that people in other European countries were also seeking stability in forceful and centralized responses to the crisis. He demonstrates that this turning from democratic institutions and a concomitant willingness to use military power were defining characteristics of the decade. This chapter also surveys the Spanish Civil War and the regularizing of relations between armies and paramilitaries in the fascist regimes of Hitler and Mussolini.

Black devotes chapter 12, "Preparing for War," to a fairly conventional overview of the interwar period, including the interplay of technology and doctrine, German rearmament, and European reaction to Hitler's military buildup. He adds a brief discussion of the 1938 Munich Agreement and its denouement in 1939. In a counterpoint to his own theme that historians should search out "the relevant lessons" of the period, he cautions that "It is too easy in hindsight ... to criticize the leaders of the period and to underrate their genuine and understandable fear of causing a second 'Great War'" (246-47).

In "Longer-term Perspectives," a section in chapter 13, "Conclusions," Black writes that "The themes in this book ... have come to the fore again in recent years" (257). In particular, he considers developments involving China and the United States against the background of the interwar period in novel ways. The rise of China makes what happened in the Far East in the 1920s and '30s of great interest to policy makers and military leaders, and the "issues of policy, tasking, strategy, doctrine and force structure facing Britain in the 1920s and 1930s are also of considerable relevance for America today." Among these issues, he includes the

“British ‘small war’ on India’s North-West Frontier” as pertinent to “the West’s recent development of counter-insurgency or COIN policies” (258).

Although I would have liked a longer book with more examples of the episodes and lessons relevant to recent events, readers of *Avoiding Armageddon* will benefit from Black’s wide reading and acute summary of available literature in this clear, suggestive, and readable survey.