



The Allure of Battle: A History of How Wars Have Been Won and Lost

by Cathal Nolan.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017. Pp. xiii, 709. ISBN 978-0-19-538378-2.

Review by Gerd Horten, Concordia University-Portland (ghorten@cu-portland.edu).

In *The Allure of Battle*, historian Cathal Nolan (Boston Univ.) argues that seductive “short-war thinking” and the grand illusions of “decisive-battle strategy” have long persisted and will continue to do so despite the hard facts of ultimate defeats and tens of millions killed. Spectacular examples of military and strategic hubris in modern Western history include the ill-conceived invasions of Russia/Soviet Union by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1812 and Adolf Hitler in the early 1940s, the expectations of a quick victory in Europe in 1914, and Imperial Japan’s preemptive strike against the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941. In each case, the aggressors believed military genius, racial superiority, or even moral righteousness would outweigh their disadvantages in population, economic resources, and geography. National leaders and military strategists convinced themselves and their people that they would prevail against the odds by winning decisive victories in the early stages of war. However, as Nolan writes, “in the largest wars fought among the biggest powers, a shared feature emerges instead: protracted stalemate born from a rough strategic balance, broken only after attritional wearing turned wars into contests of endurance” (7).

Nolan begins his chronological analysis of Western military history with a brief account of Hannibal’s challenge to Roman dominance in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). The Carthaginian commander’s brilliant, comprehensive victory at the Battle of Cannae established a paradigm of military skill trumping an opponent’s economic and manpower advantages. Even though Cannae did not in fact constitute the decisive victory of the war, as the Romans under Scipio proved at the Battle of Zama, the sheer allure of Hannibal’s personality and military achievements, immortalized in the histories of Polybius and Livy, made Cannae seem perpetually relevant and instructive.

The author goes on to discuss the advantages of the typically defensive wars of the Middle Ages, but stresses that such stumbling, halting conflicts held little appeal in the minds of monarchs and generals during the wars of nation-states in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before Frederick II and Napoleon fully restored the allure of battle and decisive victories, rulers in the medieval and early modern eras understood—and were constrained by—the high costs, both human and material, of all-out warfare. Moreover, armies comprised tens, not hundreds, of thousands of soldiers even in Frederick’s day. True mass armies emerged only with the rise of Napoleon in Revolutionary France.

Nolan sees the Napoleonic Age as pivotal in Western military history. For him, the *levée en masse* and nationalistic fervor of the French Revolution, France’s colonial riches, improved state-building, and the onset of the Industrial Revolution laid the foundation for Napoleon’s reinvention of warfare in the modern age. To be sure, Nolan grants Napoleon’s strategic talents: he ranks his defeat of Russian and Austrian forces at the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805 one of “Napoleon’s most decisive victories” (213). His defeat of the Prussian army the next year at Jena and Auerstedt

marked the height of his power. Hitler found himself in a similar position in 1941 before his fateful decision to invade Russia. Yet neither man was content with partial control over Europe and risked everything on a ruinous invasion of Russia. Nolan sees such hubris as a leitmotiv of modern military history, and not only in the West.

Although few people nowadays would endorse Carl von Clausewitz's axiom that war is "the continuation of politics by other means," the Wars of German Unification in the 1860s and early 1870s did prove decisive, as Nolan himself writes in his chapter "Battle of Annihilation." Limited wars against Denmark, Austria, and France, together with adroit diplomacy, made Germany a significant power in central Europe against the wishes of most major powers. Japan likewise raised its international status in the early twentieth century by defeating both China and Russia in rapid succession. Could the combination of decisive battles, limited political goals, and diplomatic finesse produce lasting outcomes? Might political and military leaders and their peoples avoid the kind of hubris that triggers accumulated forces of attrition and ultimate military defeat?

Of course, neither revolutionary France, nor expansionist pre-World War I Germany, nor Imperial Japan, nor National Socialist Germany relinquished its expansive dreams after moderate early successes. In fact, as Nolan stresses, those early victories themselves induced politicians and military leaders to think they could overcome their deficits of manpower, matériel, and resources vis-à-vis the countries and alliances aligned against them. They insisted that the superior fighting spirit of their soldiers could carry the day. As Nolan pointedly comments,

It is another signature sign of the short-war delusion when spiritual or moral factors are upheld over weakness in troop numbers or industrial matériel. Confederates did it in the American Civil War ("one good Reb is worth five damn Yankees"). Germans would do it in World War II. Japanese did it in all wars from 1895 to 1945. Even if it was true to start with, high morale was never decisive in the end. Matériel and manpower exhausted, then crushed, the weaker power. (383)

The book's concluding chapters concern World War II, in both the European and Pacific theaters. This is fitting, since the aggressive wars and barbaric campaigns led by Hitler's Germany and Imperial Japan go far to prove his main thesis. Both nations added to the myth of decisive victories a still more illusory and deadly belief in their racial and national superiority. The result was murderous campaigns on an unprecedented scale. In assessing such strategic and political miscalculations, Nolan underscores the vast discrepancy between Japanese and American wartime production: "The United States produced 61 tons of explosive to every one of Japan; it build 5.83 million gross tons of shipping to just 600,000; it mobilized 16.4 million men to 9.1 million. It fielded 88,000 tanks to just 2,515 for the Rikugun [Japanese Army]" (540), not to mention the support provided by numerous US allies in the Pacific theater. "It is an accountancy of hopeless as well as needless war and suffering brought to Asia and the Pacific by expansionists and militarists who could not turn back on the one-way street they started down in 1895" (540). Hitler's grand illusions ultimately met the same fate as Japan's in the face of superior enemy forces.

With *The Allure of War*, Cathal Nolan has made a significant and welcome contribution to the scholarship of military history and theory by clarifying the seductions of short-war thinking and lionized military "geniuses." Nonetheless, as he aptly puts it in his conclusion, "Prussia is wrecked, yet Frederick is the greatest of Germans. France is in ruins, but an age is named for Louis or the genius of Napoleon" (573). Thus the allure of the "decisive-battle strategy" lives on and is sure to add more chapters to its already voluminous history.