



Norway 1940: Chronicle of a Chaotic Campaign by Harry Plevy.

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Norway 1940 concerns the British authorities' (both militarily and politically) mishandled campaign in and around Norway from September 1939 to June 1940. Naval historian Harry Plevy¹ (a former metallurgist) seeks to explore his subject "in an integrated and comprehensive manner, with [attention to] ... strategic and political imperatives—as well as the fighting operations ..." (14), based on pertinent primary and secondary² sources.

The book comprises five mainly chronological parts: 1, "Political and Strategic Imperatives"; 2, "Start of the Two Month Campaign"; 3, "Fighting on Norwegian Soil"; 4, "The Fighting for Narvik and Northern Norway"; and 5, "Abandonment of Campaign." It is equipped with many high-quality photographs, excellent endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. The main strength of Plevy's discussion is its (almost too) high level of detail, for instance, concerning the debate in Britain whether to allocate forces to Trondheim or Narvik or both (chap. 6), or the withdrawal of the British troops in Romsdal³ (chap. 10).

Plevy's meticulous record of British actions (and inaction) in Norway astutely exploits numerous archival materials, especially private papers and diaries of participants. Such eyewitness accounts lend a distinct vibrancy to the narrative.

One of Plevy's main arguments is that the Norway campaign "convincingly proved the supremacy of air power in modern warfare" (14) and that the Royal Air Force (RAF) had not prepared for this kind of war and lacked state-of-the-art equipment:

The Norwegian campaign also confirmed the limitations of the RAF's policy of strategic bombing with "heavy" twin-engined aircraft. These planes (Wellingtons, Whitleys, and Hampdens) did not have the range to operate successfully over Norway, they were designed and equipped, and their crews trained, for daylight bombing against large land targets, railway marshalling yards and the like. They had poor defensive capability against modern fighters and were totally unsuitable for close support work and pin-point attacks in aid of naval or land operations. (141)

These are certainly points well taken, but Plevy's lengthy book needed the touch of an editorial scalpel. Its introduction alone runs sixty-eight pages, and its nearly four-hundred-page main text is printed in such a small font as to be barely readable. And, too, the many passages quoted in extenso sometimes dwarf the author's own words (e.g., 157–59).

A more serious flaw is Plevy's uncritical acceptance of his sources. For instance, his reliance on Harold MacMillan's memoir⁴ concerning the supposed "general feeling" (30) of the British people

1. His previous work includes *Battleship Sailors: The Fighting Career of HMS Warspite Recalled by Her Men* (London: Chatham, 2001) and *Destroyer Actions: September 1939–June 1940* (Stroud, UK: History Pr, 2006).

2. Esp. T.K. Derry, *The Campaign in Norway* (London: HM Stat. Off., 1952).

3. Spelled "Ramsal" in fig. 1, one of seven misspellings on that map.

4. *Winds of Change, 1914–1939* (NY: Harper and Row, 1966).

in the mid-1930s is problematic. Though they are, of course, valuable resources, memoirs must be used with caution: memories are volatile and subjective, and human beings prone to “correct” what they have witnessed through the years.

One often wishes the author had adopted a more analytical approach in his treatment of the motives and actions of not only the British, but the Germans, French, and Norwegians (among others) in the Norway campaign. It may be objected that Plevy meant his book to be a chronicle pure and simple, but he, in fact, sometimes shows higher ambitions.

As a Norwegian, I would add that writing such a book without the necessary understanding of the Norwegian part of the story is less than ideal. Though Plevy credits Maj. Gen. Carl Gustav Fleischer’s troops for the part they played in the short-lived liberation of Narvik (chaps. 12, 15), most of the text lacks a Norwegian perspective. For instance, the author states that the invading German forces were “aided by international political treachery by the Norwegian Vidkun Quisling and his Norwegian National Socialist Party” (325). But Quisling’s attempted coup (9 Apr. 1940) through a speech on national radio surprised both the Norwegians and the Germans. Further, though Quisling played an important part later during the German occupation, his and his political party’s influence on the German invasion itself was limited. Quisling’s radio speech confused some Norwegians, but had the effect of hardening the position of the Government and the King in rejecting the German demands, especially since the Germans decided to include Quisling as part of the new government. Hence, it is not entirely correct to say that Quisling and his party “aided” the Germans in the two-month Norway campaign.

This lack of a Norwegian viewpoint in the book accurately reflects the British conduct of the campaign; the British cared very little for Norwegian or local perspectives and antagonized members of the Norwegian government by their behavior during a campaign that might have cast them as liberators of Norway in 1940 instead of 1945.

Norway 1940 is exactly what its subtitle promises—a chronicle. But, unlike the British Norway campaign itself, it is well researched, planned, and executed. It would, however, have profited from greater concision and attention to analysis.