



Armoured Warfare: A Military, Political and Global History by Alaric Searle.

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With this concise new study of armored warfare, historian Alaric Searle (Univ. of Salford) has made a timely and important contribution to the cyclical debate about the nature, evolution, and ongoing utility of armored fighting vehicles (AFVs).¹ He sets that discussion in a broader historical context.

The book comprises an introduction, ten chapters, and a conclusion. Chapters 1-9 proceed chronologically, starting with World War I and ending with the wars in Iraq. Chapter 10 concerns the “political nature” of the tank. A series of seven themes runs through all the chapters: the origin and precursors of the tank, terminology, technological considerations, debates about armored warfare, the experience of the crews, basic principles, and political history. These enable the author to more effectively compare changes in thinking and technology. He also touches on the iron trio of design choices that went into each vehicle: firepower, mobility, and protection, observing that physical realities made it impossible to maximize all three. Oddly, he does not follow up this fascinating observation.

Chapters 1-5 describe the introduction of the tank in 1916, its interwar development, and its impact in World War II. The first chapter concerns the tenuous nature of tank warfare in the First World War and the struggle by the British and French commanders, not to mention tankers themselves, to capitalize on the new machines. Searle writes that the battle of La Malmaison (23-27 Oct. 1917)

saw a technological innovation for the French tank force, with two Schneiders and two St Chamonds employed which had been converted to radio-telegraphy tanks. Malmaison proved successful in its objectives with the French advancing up to 6km, capturing over 11,000 Germans, substantial quantities of equipment, with total casualties of just under 12,000 men. Tanks crew casualties were: 20 killed, with 62 wounded, much lighter than previous French tank engagements. However, of the 63 tanks engaged, only 21 made any meaningful contribution to the battle. So was the battle a success or not? (21)

After going into further detail, he concludes that the tanks did make a difference.

Chapter 2 looks at the interwar period, elucidating the interplay of theory and technological realities. It is well known that the victorious states of the Great War were far more doctrinaire than the losers. Strategists in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia were more willing to experiment and take into account the theories of armored warfare written by foreigners.

Chapters 3-5 cover World War II, concentrating on Europe and especially the great tank battles in Russia. Searle places a welcome corrective stress on the importance of traffic control, radio communication, and command units to German successes, especially early on. However, one

1. See, most recently, “Army Surplus?” in *The Economist* (12 Sept. 2020) 70.

misses here a close analysis of the value of artillery and airpower doctrine for the operation of armor formations.

Chapters 6–9 move from the end of World War II up to the present. Chapter 6 sheds light on the use of armor in Korea, Indo-China (by the French), and Vietnam (by the Americans). While both French and US counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam are often seen as a war of helicopters, Searle notes that

The French proved that armour could be used effectively in the various types of terrain of what later became Vietnam. But armoured units were not exploited to their full advantage: first due to the limitations of the vehicles initially delivered; and second, due to the failure of the French to understand the correct role for mobile units quickly enough. (120)

The author devotes chap. 7 to contrasting the actual experience of counter-insurgency with a hypothetical war featuring armor battles on the German Plain and the perceived disparity in numbers between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces. Chapter 8 provides a fine summary of the Arab-Israeli wars between 1948 and 2006, in which the Israelis again and again proved that superior tactical doctrine, flexible leaders, and effective command and control could make up for deficits in numbers.

Finally, chap. 9 considers the diverse fighting across the Persian Gulf region, from the Iraq-Iran wars to the present. The Iraq-Iran conflict saw severe AFV losses on both sides owing to poor doctrine, training, and leadership. By contrast, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq proved that AFV firepower and protective armor could play a key role in fighting, despite the advent of improvised explosive devices.

Searle ends with an acute, albeit too short, chapter regarding the political impact of armor on the minds of citizens and the intentions of governments. Since its introduction a century ago, the tank has become a potent symbol of political oppression, whether in Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, or Beijing in 1989 (which the author omits).

Given the chronological scope of his ambitious book, Alaric Searle cannot cover everything. But he does ask provocative questions that should inspire further research on a variety of topics still needing investigation. *Armoured Warfare* is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in the evolution of military technology in modern warfare.