

Mawdsley, Evan. *Thunder in the East: the Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945*. London: Hodder Education, 2007, xxvi+502 pp. £14.99 paperback.

Evan Mawdsley, Professor of International History at the University of Glasgow, has written a first-rate account of World War II on the Eastern Front. Mawdsley asks "the big questions: Why did the military conflict in the East develop as it did? Why did the Germans lose? Why did the Russians win? Why did it cost them such a high price?" Readers of this journal will not need persuading of the importance of these questions, but they may wonder why the time is right for another monograph. We still have the classic works of Alexander Werth, John Erickson, and David Glantz, to which have recently been added *Stalingrad* and *Berlin: the Downfall* by Antony Beevor, *Absolute War* by Chris Bellamy, *Moscow 1941* by Rodric Braithwaite, *Ivan's War* by Catherine Merridale, and *Stalin's Wars* by Geoff Roberts.

A Russian specialist, Mawdsley makes extensive use of both Russian and German sources to provide a new account of how the war evolved on both sides that is balanced and scholarly. The main value that is added is from new sources in Russian, and the focus of attention is also roughly 2:1 in favour of the Russian side, but at each stage there is new scope to reevaluate the struggle as a whole, and this is one merit of the book.

Thunder in the East is organised mainly as a narrative. The timeline is divided in two by the spring of 1943 when the tide of the war turned. Each part begins with two analytical chapters so, in part I, chapters 1 and 2 deal with "Hitler's War" and "Preparations and Perceptions" on each side and chapters 3 to 6 then follow the invading forces to Stalingrad. In part II, chapters 7 and 8 consider "Wartime Arms and Armies" and "Occupation and Diplomacy" under total war, while chapters 9 to 11 and 13 follow the Red Army from Stalingrad to Berlin. A nice surprise is chapter 12, which gives close attention to the varied endings of the war in the lesser known theatres of the eastern front: not only Poland as usual but Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. Chapter 14 sums up and concludes. The narrative is usefully supported by statistical tables, maps, and a chronology of the war. There is little or no documentation that is entirely original, but the bibliographical and statistical reference base is up to date and comprehensive.

Mawdsley's war is seen chiefly from the high command, that is, it looks at strategic and operational objectives, the evaluation of resources on each side, the quality of decision making, the sequence of battles, the supply of battlefields, the significance of the outcomes, and the reasons for them. There is little reflection of the "face of battle" that was seen by the soldiers of the rank and file and the civilians over whose land they fought.

The style of the book is deliberately judicious and balanced, and offers many judgements that appear sensible and well reasoned to this reviewer, although not everyone will like them. I will list a few. By going to war, Hitler aimed to exploit and enslave European Russia, not (as was sometimes claimed) to forestall Stalin's drive to the west. The

initial successes of the German invasion did not depend primarily on surprise. The Red Army suffered defeats at this time despite preponderant numbers and lavish equipment. Stalin's political will and unanticipated Soviet reserves were more important in the battle of Moscow than General Winter. "Both nationalism and socialism were vital to the stability and survival of the Stalinist system" (p. 399). The decisive battles of Moscow, Stalingrad and Kursk were definitely won by the Red Army, not just lost by the Wehrmacht. Specifically, the war was won by a combination "of mass, of organisation, and of production" (p. 223), with due weight given to economics. The victory on the eastern front cannot be taken out of the context of Allied aid and cooperation; Germany's European allies, in contrast, were more often than not a burden. The Soviet high command matured in wartime while the German one regressed. Stalin's principal fault as war leader was to make the victory much more costly in lives than it needed to be. Stalin's wartime speeches provide a self-serving but nonetheless distinctly useful commentary on the process and outcome of the war. The Soviet and Nazi systems were both totalitarian and Hitler and Stalin were both odious tyrants, but Stalin's victory was better for the world and for Russia than the thousand-year Reich of Hitler's dreams. And yet, "defeat made possible the transformation of Germany; victory perpetuated the most harmful features of the Soviet system" (p. 406).

I am not completely sure who will provide this book's best market. World War II enthusiasts are likely to find it deficient in the sounds and smells of the battlefield. It will rightly find its way onto many reading lists; it is a sensible and balanced interpretation, and we like our students to have sensible, balanced textbooks. It may be more recommended than closely read because, in this book-resistant age, many students will lack the prior knowledge of people and places to absorb the detail easily. Finally, other scholars will read *Thunder in the East*; they will find plenty of intrinsic interest, but they will also want to know whether it should change the way we all see or do history. To have lasting impact on scholarship, a work of reinterpretation must take risks, including the risk of being proved fundamentally wrong. Mawdsley has taken some risks, none of them large on its own, but cumulatively quite significant. So there is a chance of shifting our perspectives on these pivotal years; the future will show whether he did enough to realise it.

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