



The Real War 1914-1918

B.H. Liddell Hart

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Captain B. H. Liddell Hart is the foremost authority on World War I. In *The Real War*, the author has fused exhaustive research and creative brilliance with brevity and precision. Thus we have in one volume the war transformed into literature - an understandable, kaleidoscopic masterwork of military history.

This 1935 hardcover edition of THE REAL WAR was updated, revised and added to somewhat, and retitled A HISTORY OF THE WORLD WAR, and a new Introduction was also added.

The Real War 1914-1918 Details

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Robert says

I had actually been looking for a one-volume history of the first world war for a long time, and was delighted when I found that Basil Liddell-Hart had written one in 1930. His writing is as usual concise and engaging, though even I had a bit of trouble staying with it through the largest battles like Verdun, the Somme, and Passchendaele, though this is really more the nature of the conflict than Liddell-Hart's writing at fault.

However, the side campaigns and the eastern front are portrayed quite vividly, and this will be a good springboard into further reading about the war.

Sam says

There is no denying that Liddell Hart is not only a brilliant tactician and an engaging historian, but he is also a wonderful writer. He has a dry sense of humor that can cut through the misery of the Great War while also highlighting the mind numbing grind of the war. It is hard to read the book without being crushed by the futility of the war, something that Liddell Hart actually accents by highlighting where the generals went wrong. The most painful battle to read, actually, is the 1914 Battle of the Marne, because he painfully highlights how the Allies could have made a breakthrough and won the war there and then, but they hesitated and created the gridlock warfare that WWI is known for.

Liddell Hart also presents an interesting analysis of Gallipoli and the Dardanelles and he believes that Churchill was right, but the battle was botched because of ineffective leadership and lack of preparation. It is interesting, because I have only read about Gallipoli being a complete disaster. I have never really read someone trying to defend it.

Not only is the subject matter interesting, but the fact that the book was written in 1930 makes it a particularly fascinating piece of history. There is a hint of weariness in the writing and the epilogue almost broke my heart. There was a sense of great loss combined with a sense of acceptance that no one had really learned their lesson.

It is also interesting to note that Liddell Hart defends Churchill in his book-during a time where Churchill had not yet proven himself the lion of England. A particularly painful part of the book is the praise that Liddell Hart gives Petain. It only makes Petain's later actions even harder to deal with and understand.

I enjoyed reading this book and finding the beginning of ideas that would later be expanded upon in Liddell Hart's book: *Strategy*. In this book one can see his preference for the indirect method over the direct method (and one gets the impression that that preference came out of WWI) and his focus on the psychological aspect of warfare as well as his preference for the creation of complex weapons that bring about the end of the war with a high casualty list, but over a short term of actual warfare, thus saving lives (although it is interesting to compare that point of view with his point of view on dropping the bomb discussed in *Strategy*).

While I truly enjoyed the book, I would have liked to see more of an emphasis on the Eastern Front and the Middle East campaign. It seems strange to me to dedicate only a chapter and half to the Turks and to

brush through the Eastern battles when the East determined the German's strategy for most of the war.

Overall it was a fantastic book about a horrible war. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested on the tactical and strategic side of WWI.

Himanshu Bhatnagar says

There are many, many ways in which history can be recounted. Over the last few decades, the trend in reporting history has taken a decidedly Marxist tone. From the rulers and their deeds the focus has shifted to the ruled and their lives. From the grand palaces we have moved to unearthing modest homes; and in war, from generals and their schemata of battle we have moved to the foot-soldier's letters to his family back home.

This history of WW1 predates this red-shift of historians' affections. There is little personal, less emotional, and nothing of the proletariat in it. It is written by a military historian, and in his scope lie the grand war-plans of the Field Marshals and the Crown Princes, the whirling, sweeping moves along fronts miles broad, entire armies described as pawns on a chessboard spanning a continent that was awash in blood by the end of the "Great War" but stubbornly refused to learn a single lesson from it.

Within the limitations described above, this book is a marvellous read indeed. It is, arguably, unmatched as a military history of WW1, written by one of the world's most eminent military historian; close enough to the actual events to have eye-witness accounts while at the same time far enough to be less clouded by nationalistic or other flavours. For a student of the history of war this book reads like a pot-boiler, full of action and larger than life characters facing each other in situations that stymied the smartest among them. Each major chapter in the war has its own section, described like a set-piece that stands alone. The set-pieces are grouped together into chapters with a preamble which provides a bird's eye view of the entire action.

The pages are awash with action, moves and counter-moves, feints and strategic retreats, mad dashes across ravaged terrain and dogged resistance in hellish trenches. Every major action of war is detailed in technical, tactical, and strategic detail. It elevates the war to the heroic struggle, the paean to mankind's endurance, the lofty epic that, for centuries, has been the popular vision. The focus is on the leaders, the generals and the commanders, and the great struggle of wills between them. But in a way, by concentrating on their actions, Liddell Hart exposes them for they are – mortals; with a few more medals than the other.

You will marvel at Foch's nonchalance and confidence while the Germans are within sniffing distance of Paris; at the British General French's (yes, really)incessant swaying between extremes of fanciful hope and premature despair; at the refusal of both sides to look for alternate ways out of the trench deadlock, at the resistance to modern technology – be they aircraft or tanks; at the utter daftness of Brusilov and the other Russian generals in forcing ill equipped, demoralized men into battle with such an organized enemy; at Hindernberg's lack of a long term goal for his short-term tactics. Page after page makes you realize just how much sheer, dumb luck matters in war, at times more than all the astuteness, vision, preparation and courage of an entire nation.

There are omissions, of course. Precious little is mentioned outside the main battleground of Europe (and the Middle East in the context of Turkey). And there is no talk of the colonial armies put into use by the Empires on both sides of the conflict. That the human angle is absent was mentioned at the start of the review, of course.

In the end, the sense you get of the Great War is that of the author as a bird soaring above the European battle lines, calmly observing the ebb and flow of armies and their fortunes; too far removed to smell the smoke, see the mud or taste the blood.

But with all its faults, it is a masterpiece of what it sets out to be, a complete military history of a Great War.

Abhinav Choudhry says

This is strictly a book for folks who are able to visualize war as a complex puzzle with complex characters who are struggling for achieving definite objectives. This is not a book for those who wish to know about the costs of war or what war wreaks on a nation. Casualties and costs are rarely mentioned. We never get to know what the peasant tilling on the fields of Germany thought of the war effort as he sat eating ersatz foods during his lunch break.

The book breathes life into even the most static military struggle the world has ever witnessed. The campaigns are covered in detail and theaters other than Europe are also covered. Being British, the author perhaps focuses a wee bit more on their efforts. However, this is an unbiased military history and it is clear that the author has genuine respect for the Germans even though he personally fought against them.

The author is scathing in his criticism of generals for wasting precious lives in futile struggles but he at the same time acknowledges where the effort might have had a greater impact. The author doesn't just describe events but also brings his own analysis and knowledge into the picture. Thus, the reader can grasp both the actual turning points of the war or the points where the war could have turned. The latter are overwhelmingly more. It is incredible how many opportunities were missed through bad generalship and poor foresight and how many were rescued through ignoring of orders at local level.

This book is sure to educate interested folks in lessons in management, strategy and tactics, perhaps the only profit from the mistakes of people long dead.

John says

In his War Memoirs, Lloyd George recalls a conversation with the French General de Castelnau as stalemate set in on the Western Front. "Had (Napoleon) been here", de Castelnau observed, "he would have thought of the something else". In fact, Napoleon's conduct at Wagram, Borodino, and Waterloo suggests otherwise, but the belief took hold. As casualties on the Western Front ran into the hundreds of thousands for a single battle while the gains were measured in yards, some observers at the time and most observers since thought that there must be an alternative, we just had to find it. Those who persisted with the attacks in France and Belgium were guilty of callous stupidity; they should have been looking for the "something else".

This book makes that argument better than any other. Understandably sickened by the Western Front, Liddell Hart developed the strategy of Indirect Approach, namely, avoiding the bulk of the enemy's forces and taking his flank or rear (see his book *Strategy*). Offensives such as Loos, the Somme, or Third Ypres, where the bulk of the British army threw itself on the defences of the bulk of the German army, should have been avoided. Instead, Liddell Hart praises Gallipoli, in theory if not in practice, and Lawrence's campaign in Arabia.

The trouble is, as Richard Holmes pointed out, that Liddell Hart "could produce no evidence that the destruction of railways in the Hejaz made the teacups rattle in Berlin". And was the Indirect Approach not what the Schlieffen Plan was all about? It failed, and in doing so it left no room for further Indirect Approaches, only costly but irrelevant sideshows like Salonika. Where there was room for the Indirect Approach, on the Eastern Front, the front line swayed inconclusively this way and that for three years until

the Tsarist regime collapsed from within. The Russian army was defeated as much by the uselessness of its own leaders as by the good generalship of the Germans.

The tragic truth is that the “something else” did not exist militarily, only politically. This was beyond the purview of the generals to deliver, except in Germany where civil authority was more completely subordinated to military authority than elsewhere. To all intents and purposes Hindenburg and Ludendorff ran Germany by the end of the war, the same could not be said for Haig in Britain or even Foch in France. If politicians could not deliver peace the generals must deliver victory and to secure this there was no alternative to defeating the German army in the field. As horrible as the Western Front was, the “something else” on another battlefield is a chimera.

Peter says

Well written book about the cause and effect of World War One.

Št?pán says

WHY did the countries fight

Rob Markley says

The first real history of the first world war I've read. Has the sharp analysis that would expect from Liddell Hart

WRH says

This was a critico of the strategy and tactics of both sides in WW I by a British military officer. It provided some interesting insights but mostly was short on overviews and long on criticism. You would need to have an indepth knowledge of WW I to get the most out of this book

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