



John M. Jennings and Chuck Steele, eds. *The Worst Military Leaders in History*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2022.

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In the field of military biography from the classical times to the contemporary period, emphasis tends to be laid on the roles of "great" military leaders in history. In this approach, an effort is always made to assess the actions, and inactions of such military leaders as a yardstick to weigh their success or failure. Contrary to this conventional approach of assessing military leaders and the history of war, Jennings and Steele's *The Worst Military Leaders in History* take an unconventional method of assessment, factoring in important issues such as the contexts and circumstances within which military leaders operate. Rather than being vindictive or judgmental of the slips and errors of past military leaders in history, the authors in this collection adopt an indefinite method of data analysis within which the failures of military leaders are treated as contextual or circumstantial while giving readers the chance to make their own judgments based

on the facts presented. This form of analysis is solely reliant on concrete, as well as convincing, historical evidence.

Lucidly written in five engaging parts, the book is a collection of fifteen articles written by different authors who are experts in military history and war studies. The major aim of the book, as its editors argue, is to "provide a counter-weight to the standard (of width and depth) in approaching military history in terms of explaining outcomes" so as to give readers the ability to question the "causes of command failure as much as the sources of success" (10). Though the editors of the book set out to study the worst military leaders in history, it becomes a herculean task for them to use failure as a criterion for identifying such leaders, as done by many military historians. On the contrary, however, the authors critique the character of military leaders, though with significant reservations, as perhaps a more reliable measure of success or failure (17).

In addressing the concept of *The Worst Military Leaders in History*, the editors of the book, though independent of the individual views of the authors of the collected chapters, categorised such leaders into five groups; criminals, frauds, the clueless, politicians, and bunglers (17). While military leaders such as Roman F. von Ungern-Sternberg, Nathan Bedford Forrest, and John Chivington are placed in the first category, David Beatty, Gideon J. Pillow and Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna formed the second category. Meanwhile, military commanders such as Conrad von Hotzendorf, Lewis H. Brereton, and George A. Custer are tagged as clueless. While commanders such as Crassus, Nikias, and Raymond VI belong to the political class, Nogi Maresuke, Romanus IV, and Garnet Wolseley were categorised as bunglers.

Part One on criminals dwells largely on the biographies of three military commanders, focusing mainly on their characters with particular reference to how they commanded and conducted themselves during war situations. John M. Jennings argues that because of his "single-minded ferocity" in fighting against the Reds in the 1920s, Roman F. von Ungern-Sternberg (1886-1921) resorted to the torture and murder of both his real and imagined enemies to the extent that his contemporaries nicknamed him the "Mad Baron" and the "Bloody Baron" (34). Despite the level of his brutalities, Jennings submits that Baron Ungern not only failed in "realising his dream of destroying the Soviet Union and restoring Imperial Rule in Russia and Asia but his actions paved the way for the spread of world socialism with the people's Republic of Mongolia emerging as the first Soviet satellite in 1924" (50). Christopher M. Rein argues in his piece that although Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877) is described by some authors as "'arguably the most capable cavalryman produced by [American Civil] War'" (51), his actions were "a mixed bag of success in unimportant battles and failure in those that proved decisive" (64). In relation to the third commander in the criminal category, Courtney A. Short observes that although John M. Chivington (1821-1894) massacred many unsuspecting Native Americans and was celebrated for his "valour" by historians, "his despicable behaviour did not even gain him the promotion he sought," and after all, he never became a general, let alone serve in the Congress (81).

In Part Two, Chuck Steele, Robert P. Wettemann, Jr., and Gates Brown provide the individual biographies of three "fraud" commanders. Steele submits that despite the fact that Sir David Beatty (1871-1936) of the Royal Navy appeared to be a "courageous and charismatic" (85) leader, he proved himself not

only a poor commander but also "a thoroughly ignoble man for his efforts to escape accountability for his actions" (100). Wettemann maintains that during the Mexican-American War, Gideon J. Pillow was not only a partisan imbecile, prone to "despicable self-puffings" (101), but he also never learned that bravery, boldness and humility could give success (115-116). As for Mexican soldier Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna (1794-1876), Gates Brown avers that he remains a controversial figure. This is because although he was courageous, risk-taking, and politically outstanding, his inability to understand the political extent of his actions places him on the list of worst military leaders.

Part Three presents the third category of the worst military leaders in history, the clueless. On top of this list is the Austrian general Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf (1852-1925). Authors Mark E. Grotelueschen and Derek Varble argue that von Hotzendorf failed on three counts, namely his pre-war bellicosity, wartime strategy, and operational guidance. On the other hand, John J. Abbatiello opines that American air commander Lewis Brereton ranks low among great air leaders as the commander in "not just one, but four major Allied failures of the Second World War" (165). David W. Mills concludes that the American cavalry commander George A. Custer (1839-1876), although perhaps the best-known American general, was nevertheless clueless, especially given the arrogance and recklessness that led to his death at Little Bighorn alongside hundreds more soldiers.

In Part Four, the authors focus mainly on the political class of the worst military leaders in history. Starting with Roman general Marcus Licinius Crassus (died 53BC), Gregory S. Hospodor believes that this commander's life teaches "us that an unreflective trust in a culturally acceptable systems approach to war and war-fighting can lead to a debacle" (198). While commenting on Athenian general Nicias (c.470-413BC), author James Tucci opines that his failure during the Sicilian expedition was catastrophic and he clearly and repeatedly demonstrated his incompetence as a military commander. More so than in Nicias' case, Laurence W. Marvin puts Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse (1156-1222), in the pantheon of worst military leaders based on his conduct and performance in medieval France, largely as a result of his deficient strategic and tactical judgment, which plagued almost all his actions and decisions.

Part Five, the final one, provides a critical investigation into the lives of the last three military commanders, all categorised as bunglers. Here, Danny Orbach argues that the failure of military leaders like the Japanese general Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912) was largely contextual due to his "tactical mistakes, lack of coordination between the attacking forces and simple misfortune" (252). Similarly, Andrew Holt argues that the inability of Romanus IV Diogenes (died 1072) to reform his state and assemble loyal and committed soldiers around him, as well as his lack of intelligence network and viable strategies, proved his failure as a military leader. Unlike Diogenes, Joseph Moretz claims that Viscount Garnet Wolseley (1833-1913) of Great Britain was a courageous leader who commanded several successful expeditions but was administratively bankrupt apart from the fact that he had never faced a serious enemy. Moretz also maintains that the Viscount's last expedition of Tel el-Kebir in 1882 testifies to his limitations as a military commander (282).

A closer reading of the book, however, reveals a lack of chronology in the arrangement of the biographies of the military commanders under study. For instance, instead of first presenting Ungern-

Sternberg's biography, the discussion of Nathan Bedford Forrest who fought during the American Civil War should have come first. This also applies to the presentation of Sir David Beatty ahead of Robert P. Wettemann, Jr. Even if this arrangement is for convenience it should not have been at the expense of proper historical chronology.

Interestingly, however, though the book is a collection of articles by different authors, the uniformity in its style, mode of presentation, and straight-to-the-point analysis, is quite commendable. The book is no doubt an important contribution not only to the field of biography but also to military history and war studies. It is, therefore, an important source material for military historians, military institutions, biographers, and anybody interested in studying the interplay of cause and effect, slips, and errors in the careers of past military leaders with a view to learning good lessons.

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