

2023

Review of "Armies in Retreat: Chaos, Cohesion and Consequences" edited by Timothy G. Heck and Walker D. Mills

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Recommended Citation

Gasson, Jake "Review of "Armies in Retreat: Chaos, Cohesion and Consequences" edited by Timothy G. Heck and Walker D. Mills." Canadian Military History 32, 2 (2023)

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Timothy G. Heck and Walker D. Mills, eds. *Armies in Retreat: Chaos, Cohesion and Consequences*. Fort Leavenworth: Army University Press, 2023. Pp. 436.

Retreats have occurred throughout the history of warfare. The editors of this collection, Timothy G. Heck and Walker D. Mills, observe that there is evidence of retreats as early as the first recorded battle in history, the Battle of Megiddo in 1457 BC. Defeated on the battlefield by the Egyptian army of Thutmose III, the forces of the King of Kadesh fled in disarray to seek safety behind the walls of Megiddo, an event recorded for posterity on the walls of Karnak Temple. Historians have not failed to study individual retreats. Many are subject to historical controversy or shrouded in myth. Debate, for instance, surrounds the performance of the British Expeditionary Force at the Battle of Mons and the subsequent retreat prior to the Battle of the Marne in 1914.¹ For Britain, another myth, the evacuation of troops from Dunkirk in 1940, was quickly mythologised as a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. The phrase “Dunkirk spirit” quickly became shorthand for the stoic self-reliance believed uniquely characteristic of Britons and has become part of the national psyche.²

Drawing together a wide range of case studies of retreats from ancient Greece to contemporary cyber operations, *Armies in Retreat: Chaos, Cohesion and Consequences* intends to further the historical understanding of why, how and when armies retreat. It is a collection that will appeal to many audiences. The impetus came from the ongoing pivot by the US military away from decades of counterinsurgency to a renewed focus on great power competition. Heck and Mills write that confronting peer and near-peer adversaries entails the possibility that the United States will face the prospect of defeat, with this study intended as an instructive corrective to the focus on how armies have prevailed rather than responded to reverses. As such, it aims, first and foremost, to use applied history to help policymakers and military practitioners prepare to respond to such an eventuality. To

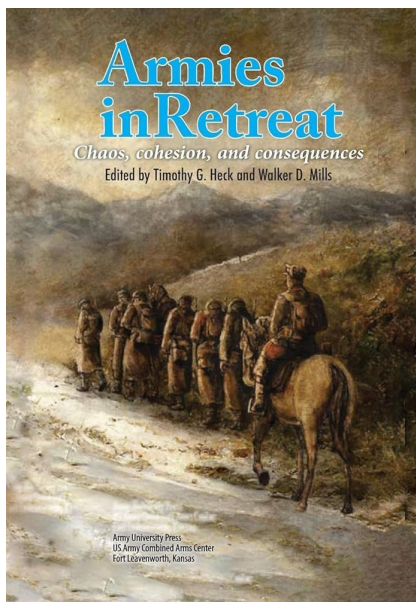
¹ John Terraine, *Mons: Retreat to Victory* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1960); Terence Zuber, *The Mons Myth: A Reassessment of the Battle* (Stroud: History Press, 2010); and Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014).

² Martin S. Alexander, “Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories,” in Robert Tombs and Emile Chabal, eds., *Britain and France in Two World Wars: Truth, Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 93-118.

do so, this collection seeks to advance the historical understanding of retreats through rigorous analysis rather than the “political bias and self-serving content” which the editors consider have often characterised studies of retreats and defeats, notably the Confederacy and the *Wehrmacht* (p. 4). Scholars will accordingly find much of interest. The breadth and lucidity of the chapters mean there is also much to appeal to the general reader.

The case studies mainly consider campaigns fought during the early modern and modern periods, ranging from the Seven Years’ War (1756-63) to the Korean War (1950-53). While many unsurprisingly examine engagements in which the US Army was involved, one of this collection’s many strengths is the variety of chapters. Looking beyond such famous retreats as Napoleon from Moscow in 1812 reveals many comparatively obscure examples. As with any edited collection, each author’s approach differs. While most centre on the operational level of war, others consider strategic, political, tactical, and cultural dimensions of retreat. A consensus that history offers lessons to policymakers and military practitioners today provides a unitary thread throughout the collection. To this end, some chapters use modern doctrine to frame their analyses, notably Andrew O.G. Young’s examination of the British retreat during the 1807-8 Corunna Campaign and Patrick H. Hannum’s study of the 1781 Yorktown Campaign. Because of the distinctiveness of each case study, the editors do not seek to make any central argument but instead organise the collection according to three themes: chaos, cohesion and consequences (p. 3).

Together, the sections on chaos and cohesion point towards the factors which have determined whether a retreating army, on the one hand, descended into disarray and disintegration or, on the other hand, maintained order and responded effectively to reverses. Unsurprisingly, several authors underline the importance of preparation. Aside from the failure of the commissariat to establish depots, the scant discussion of retreats in contemporary doctrine and military education leads



Young to argue that the British were conceptually unprepared for retirement during the Corunna Campaign. Looking to the present, he warns that the same lack of intellectual readiness affects the British Army today. On the other hand, several authors attribute effective retreat to exhaustive preparations. The Plataean withdrawal from their city in 428-27 BC during the Peloponnesian War, writes Jonathan H. Warner, rested on extensive planning "down to their footwear" (p. 105). On the Eastern Front, Gregory P. Liedtke examines how the *Wehrmacht* withdrew methodically and with minimal losses from the Demyansk Salient in February 1943 to a series of prepared defensive lines via designated roads. He notes that planning rested on doctrinal foundations and war gaming retreats at the *Kriegsakademie*.

Unit cohesion also features throughout. It is central to Frank A. Blazich's chapter on the Provisional Air Corps Regiment (PACR) at Bataan between January and April 1942 during the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Established on an ad hoc basis from grounded aviators, ground crew, and mechanics, he argues that the experienced leadership of Lieutenant Colonel David L. Hardee and Colonel Irvin E. Doane, both career infantry officers, and maintaining its original organisational structure preserved unit cohesion amidst unfavourable circumstances. Even though American forces ultimately surrendered, he shows that an infantry unit formed out of necessity performed well defensively. As Tyler D. Wentzell shows in his chapter on the XVth International Brigade during the Spanish Nationalist Aragon Offensive launched in March 1938, the collapse of unit cohesion could result in chaos. Fatigued and fearing mistreatment if taken prisoner, men discarded their weapons and retreated rather than standing and fighting. Junior officers, he writes, could not prevent their units from disintegrating. However, Young's chapter demonstrates that the collapse of cohesion is not necessarily irreversible. While affected by indiscipline and panic during the retreat to Corunna, the British successfully turned and checked their French pursuers.

What emerges strongest of all is the role of leadership, the "one constant," according to Heck and Mills, given that "armies and units are held together by their leaders" (p. 427). In his chapter on the Northern Army's retreat from Canada during the American War of Independence, Jonathan D. Bratten writes of the example set by the "dogged determination" of its leaders (p. 150). With the Prussian army of Lieutenant General Johann Dietrich von Hülsen outnumbered three-to-one in Saxony during the Seven Years' War, Alexander S. Burns

concludes that von Hülsen “anticipated and planned for his opponent’s likely move at each stage of the campaign” and thereby avoided being brought to battle by superior enemy forces. (p. 133). Nikolas E. Gardner’s chapter on the retreat of the 6th Indian Division to Kut-al-Amara between November and December 1915 highlights the cognitive strain imposed on leaders by retreats. Framed by Gardner as “Clausewitzian friction,” Townshend’s exhaustion, concern for the loyalty of his Indian troops, and anxiety given the uncertain dispositions and intentions of the opposing Ottoman forces influenced the decisions he made, culminating in the division’s entrenchment at Kut, where it later surrendered.

In the section on consequences, the authors reveal how retreats have had significant political, strategic, operational, and cultural ramifications. Jason D. Lancaster examines the delayed decision to withdraw British troops from Walcheren in 1809. Coalition imperatives and domestic political turmoil delayed the decision to bring a poorly planned amphibious expedition to the Scheldt Estuary to an end, leading much of the force to fall prey to disease. Through her study of American Civil War songs, Catherine V. Bateson argues that the Irish American soldiers of the 69th New York State Militia used their rearguard action to repurpose the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run as exemplifying their loyalty to the United States. Anthony J. Cade II shows how the retreat of the XI Corps, known as “The German Corps,” at the Battle of Chancellorsville led to racial prejudice towards German immigrants within the military and broader society. Although responsibility rested upon its inexperienced commander General Joseph Hooker and the numerical superiority of Confederate forces, German soldiers were subsequently considered cowards and the unit gained the derogatory moniker “The Flying Dutchmen.”

Overall, this collection proves invaluable to those interested in how armies have retreated throughout history. As the editors recognise, non-Western retreats and maritime withdrawals require further research (p. 426). Considering the centrality of a possible confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific to the US military, the latter is a significant omission. Aside from Warner’s distinction between “retreat,” “withdrawal” and “evacuation” (p. 100), neither is there any attempt to define the terminology of retreats. That said, the editors and the authors should be commended for the breadth of this collection and the insightful lessons drawn from the past for future conflict.

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