Lessons From the Battle of Norway

The German Invasion of Norway
April 1940

The Battle for Norway
April June 1940

In 1993, the very first issue of Joint Force Quarterly, the official magazine of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, featured a major article on the 1940 German invasion of Norway: It argued that Operation Weserübung (“W terse Exercise”) was worth studying because it was the prototype of a modern joint campaign—one planned and executed by ground, sea, and air forces.

The invasion, the Allied response, and the political and strategic backdrop still have much to teach us. The combination of rapid assaults on multiple strategic points, the creative use of air power to offset weakness at sea, and the ever-present role of chance and human error have a very modern ring. Despite this, even the best studies of this operation tend to emphasize the perspective of one nation or force.

Geirr H. Haarr’s new two-volume work is a tremendous accomplishment. The Norwegian researcher strives for comprehensive coverage: the German invaders, Norwegian defenders, and the British and French expeditionary forces sent to Scandinavia all receive thorough scrutiny. There is perhaps a bias toward naval operations, but given the nature of the campaign this emphasis is entirely appropriate. His concise yet thorough treatment of the aerial dimension is especially noteworthy.

The first volume zeroes in on the critical first days of Weserübung and offers a minutely detailed account of the unfolding action. The author strikes a careful balance between chronology and geography, covering nearly simultaneous events in separate sections. He demonstrates how superior German planning, exploitation of the element of surprise, and the ability to seize fleeting opportunities and capitalize on Allied mistakes overpowered the Allies. The German navy was focused on heading off British mining operations as soon as possible, and this, combined with the German air force’s ability to seize fleeting opportunities, created the condition of rapid assaults on multiple points, creating the conditions for victory. It was a near-run thing: elderly reservists defended Oslo, displaying tremendous initiative, managed to stall the German advance, and in the process sinking the brand new cruiser Blücher. The volume concludes with the epic naval battle at Narvik, where the German navy lost most of its destroyers but also hope it had of executing an invasion of the British Isles later that year. The second volume paints a broader canvas, detailing the Allied expeditionary response and the naval, air, and ground battles throughout the country, culminating with the British withdrawal in June 1940.

Many classic accounts of this campaign omit a key dimension: the Norwegians. Too often they are seen only as passive observers of the drama being played out between the great powers, but the Norwegian government faced an unenviable dilemma. Though sympathetic to the Allied cause, it staunchly sought to guard its neutrality—a stance that proved increasingly untenable when Norway found itself caught between an aggressive, expansionist Germany and a Great Britain determined to act in its own security interests. Thus, on the eve of the invasion, the Norwegian navy was focused on heading off British mining operations at sea as even as German naval and airborne forces bore down on the coast. Haarr does full justice to the actions of the outnumbered and outclassed Norwegian forces without exaggerating their overall significance.

The volumes are very well illustrated with photographs, many published for the first time. Numerous appendices contain orders of battle, lists of ships, and key personnel. The maps are well done but there are too few, given the importance of geography and the rapid pace of the operation. Keep a good map close by: “The battle omits the key dimension: the Norwegians.” These are minor blemishes on a major new contribution.

—Richard R. Muller

The Last Good War: The Faces and Voices of World War II


Appeasement: it’s one of America’s dirtiest words. We all know it means cravenly surrendering democratic ideals in the face of totalitarian m ilitary might, and that it caused World War II. But author Joseph Maiolo recasts what appeasement meant at the time. In the unstable decade before the war, when the Depression had flattened the economies worldwide, the relentless military-industrial buildup that every major nation—including the United States—eventually joined was the true propellant pushing the globe to yet another brink.

In that grim context, for instance, British p rewar policy wasn’t the complete naivety it can seem in retrospect. Not just the spawn of cowardly and blinkered politicians, appeasement was the diplomatic face of deterrence, Britain’s only viable military strategy in an all-out continental war. In the short-to-intermediate term, however unequally or ineptly they executed the policy, the Brits were focused on buying time to revamp their economy for total war—just like everyone else. That’s because all the major powers agreed on one thing: they were sure that what was clearly coming, whether they craved it or feared it, would almost certainly involve a long, ghastly struggle of attrition. And the nations with the biggest, least vulnerable, best prepared economies would eventually win.

Expanding on work by A. J. P. Taylor, Adam Tooze, and Norman Stone, Maiolo emphasizes how everyone on all sides learned this vital lesson from World War I and put it to various uses. He uncovers how the political econ-
A Lucky Child
A Memoir of Surviving Auschwitz as a Young Boy
A remarkable, harrowing, triumphant story by an internationally respected jurist.

The Envoy
The Epic Rescue of the Last Jews of Europe in the Desperate Closing Months of World War II
The entwined tales of Raoul Wallenberg and Adolphe Eichmann, riveting with new research and this best-selling writer's narrative flair.

The "Good War"
In American Memory
Uncovers many genuine historical cracks lurking beneath varnished popular "memories" of World War II.

A Flawed Genius
Field Marshall Walter Model
Argues Model was brilliant but brutal, erratic, and deeply involved in war crimes.

Skorzeny
The Most Dangerous Man in Europe
Fluenty hits the high points: Mussolini's mountaintop rescue, intrigues with the Gehlen organization and OSS and CIA, postwar affair with Eva Peron.

Guests of the Emperor
The Secret History of Japan's Mukden POW Camp
This vital complex manufactured parts for Zeros, using the slave labor of American POWs. Some became guinea pigs for the infamous Unit 731. After the war, our government focused on Unit 731's bio-warfare horrors and ignored much of what happened there.

NISEI ROUNDUP

Just Americans
How Japanese Americans Won a War at Home and Abroad
At times contentious and overstated, the book underlines the racist expectations confronting loyal Japanese Americans.

NISEI LINGUISTs
Japanese Americans in Military Intelligence Service During World War II
Traces the development and pivotal contributions of Japanese American intelligence operatives.

MOVIES GOING FOR BROKE
Three films offered a smart look at the Niseis who served in World War II.

W on a W ar at Home and Abroad
 Hosted by former Senator Daniel Inouye and narrated by Star Trek's George Takei, this 2006 documentary combines archival footage and contemporary interviews in 75 eye-opening minutes.

Go for Broke
Written and directed by acclaimed Robert Picardo (Battlefield, Combat), featuring many veterans as actors, this little-known 92-minute film from 1953 stars Van Johnson as a prejudiced Texan who learns to respect his Nisei troops.

Gene Santoro

GRAPHIC NONFICTION

trolls wound through war-torn Nazi Europe. Take Noor Inayat Khan, a gentle Indian princess. Before the war, she played the harp and wrote children's books in 1943, she's in Paris, sent by the SOE to act as a wireless radio operator for a resistance network dubbed Prosper. Her problem: the Nazis quickly learn her code name, and have set their crack wireless detection teams to tracing her. The average life expectancy of an SOE agent on the ground in Europe at the time: six weeks. Think Watchmen and The Dark Knight Returns with more text, genuine history, and real people, and you're in the zone.

Gene Santoro
As the Allies’ nemesis in the Pacific air war, the Zero epitomized Japanese air power. Combining excellent maneuverability and range, the Mitsubishi A6M Zero gained a legendary reputation early in the war. As the war progressed, however, improving Allied tactics and an improved generation of aircraft such as the P-51 Mustang signaled the decline of the Zero’s dominance.

In keeping with wartime photographs of wrecked aircraft, Masterpiece Models has introduced the first of what is to be its line of destroyed aircraft. Produced in resin, the kit contains seven cast parts, which make up the fuselage, wing, tail section, and cockpit interior. Also included is a photo-etched sheet, which is used to produce the ailerons, elevators, rudder, and cockpit canopy frame.

The detail of the parts is good, as is the overall fit, and assembly takes only an hour. A few brief construction notes:

Because the interior parts are installed from the underside, remember to install the cockpit interior parts (instrument panel, the pilot seat, and control stick) into the fuselage before attaching the wing. My kit had small gaps along the wing roots, which were easily fixed by using CA glue and then squeezing the wings against the fuselage.

The limited number of parts makes this a perfect weekend project and a great “starter” model. Offered in 1/35th scale (the typical scale for armor and figure modeling), this kit would be the perfect centerpiece in a diorama.

—Rick Lawler

GAME REVIEW

Last summer, Wargaming.net, the strategy game developer, introduced the beta preview of their World War II-era multiplayer online tank combat shooter, World of Tanks. Smoothly combining the moment-to-moment intensity of piloting a 20-ton war machine with nerve-wracking team-based strategy, World of Tanks will prove stimulating to both hardcore action gamers and mainstream armchair generals.

Success depends on a squadron’s ability to juggle the strengths and weaknesses of five classes of tanks. Whether your inclination is to scout and harass the enemy in a light tank, vie for control of the ever-shifting flank in a medium rig, or lead the charge in a colossus such as the late-war German prototype Panzer VIII Maus, fans of churning steel and fire will find their niche. Conversely, those who favor a more strategically-paced approach can hang back with artillery and tank hunters, waiting for targeting data from front-line teammates to come over the radio so they can rain lead on unsuspecting opponents at the critical moment.

The game’s historical detail is noteworthy: the speed, armor, and firepower specifications of the more than 150 Russian, German, and American tanks factor into the way each tank works in-game. The game goes live early this winter; before then, World of Tanks is a beta worth playing and a title to keep an eye on, promising long-lasting and versatile multiplayer fun for anyone who enjoys simulated tank combat. —Patrick Clark

(More at WorldWarll.com)