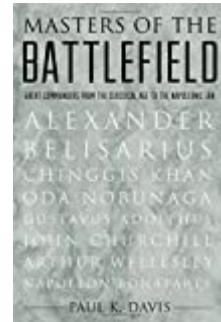


H-Net Reviews

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Paul K. Davis. *Masters of the Battlefield: Great Commanders from the Classical Age to the Napoleonic Era.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 624 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-534235-2.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

If you have read other works by Paul K. Davis (most notably, *100 Decisive Battles: From Ancient Times to the Present* [2001]), you should know exactly what to expect in his newest work, *Masters of the Battlefield*. This collection of essays purports to discuss a list of vital and important military matters with some connection between essays but with a large degree of separation between most. It is a series of short biographical essays ranging from the classical era of Greece to the time of Napoleon. Most of the generals named, aside from Jan Zizka, leader of the Hussite armies, will be familiar to readers, perhaps comfortably so; most are from the main channels of popular military history studies. Aside from Chinggis Khan and Subodei (two Mongol generals who share a chapter), Han Xin, and Oda Nobunga, most of the chosen generals, for example, spring from the “Western” tradition.

This familiarity appears intentional. Davis focuses on battlefield tactics and aspects of generalship (technology, speed, character) that were centered on victory in battle rather than more difficult matters of grand strategy, with only slight interest in logistics and diplomacy. He mainly emphasizes areas in which his readers are likely to be already interested, although he does point to a few battles, a few leaders, and a few minor factors (like Wellington’s skill in small tactics based on his Indian experience as

well as Zizka and Gustavus Adolphus’s religious fervor) that may be less known to readers.

This book is a generally accessible book for a mid-brow audience as opposed to a scholarly work. Most of the books it cites are widely accessible secondary works by such historians as Peter Paret and John Keegan. The work is full of maps that are helpful in explaining the various battles chosen by the author to reflect the generalship of the leaders. Each chapter has a similar and straightforward organization. They begin with biographical introductions of the generals and their early life with some explanation of the sociopolitical and military context of their time. A chronological account of notable battles, campaigns, and opponents follows, with specific attention paid to such factors as speed, morale, deceptiveness, avoidance of casualties, achievement of victory, and pursuit (with the goal of the destruction of the enemy army). Each essay closes with an analysis of the general’s role in the history and development of warfare; the general’s influence on the behavior of others from the author’s perspective; the works of modern biographers; and the U.S. Field Army Manual 100-5, dealing with principles of operational leadership.

In most cases, the generals stand alone as the only

great generals of their age, but twice Davis points to contemporaries and rivals: Hannibal and Scipio and Napoleon and Wellington. Despite some efforts at comparison between the essays (such as the author showing the debt that Frederick II owed to Epaminondas of Thebes for the oblique order), most of the essays are self-contained. Those who are looking for an accessible and modest secondary work without pretensions at extensive primary research will be satisfied with this collection, especially if they enjoyed the author's previous work, which is presented in a similar vein and covers similar terrain. Some readers will find the list format a bit superficial, the lengthy but largely secondary research a bit lacking, and the few examples of unfamiliar generals insufficient to answer charges of ethnocentrist bias.

The introduction indicates that this book sprang from a suggestion by Oxford University Press to expand *100 Decisive Battles* to look at battles of particular regions and times. It is unclear if the author wishes to examine

other aspects of generalship that are much more often neglected, like generals whose success arose from their diplomatic genius or from their gift at logistics. One of the more substantial criticisms of this work, particularly in light of the experience of modern war, is that a focus on generals who can win set-piece battles is nearsighted given that today it is far more common for a powerful army, like that of the United States, to win all or most of the battles and still struggle to succeed because tactical success has not been tied to reasonable political and strategic goals. Davis also does not pay sufficient attention to morale on the home front. This book, with its focus on battles, grand tactics, and operations, does not provide the instruction necessary to inform readers on the biggest obstacles to success in modern conflicts, though perhaps it is easier and more profitable for an author to appeal to the desires of readers to think about supposedly simpler ages and ways of war rather than the tangles of our own experience.

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