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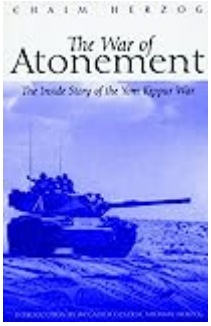

Chaim Herzog. *The War of Atonement: The Inside Story of the Yom Kippur War.* London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2003. xx + 300 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85367-569-0.

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The Yom Kippur War: Still Relevant After all These Years

This volume is a reprinted edition of a book originally published in 1975. In it, Chaim Herzog, an Israeli general and later President of the State of Israel, provides what is still very much the authoritative account of what Israelis call the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the Arabs call the War of Ramadan. The coordinated attack that began on the sixth of October in 1973 (Yom Kippur–the holiest day in the Jewish calendar) was initiated and carried out by Egypt and Syria in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights respectively. The attack, which took the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) totally by surprise, was the outcome of a grave intelligence mistake that almost caused the destruction of Israel. The war lasted for three weeks and represents one of the largest and most intense armor, infantry and air battles in modern history. Its outcome was a turning point in Middle East history since it demonstrated Israel?s vulnerability, proved Syria and Egypt?s military power, and set the base for the peace accords later signed between Israel and Egypt, and the peace talks that were held between Israel and Syria.

Issued on the thirtieth anniversary of this conflict, the book includes a new introduction written by Brigadier General Michael Herzog, the author?s son and a serving officer in the IDF. This introduction provides some insights about the author, emphasizes the importance of the book, and draws some of the wider lessons it bears for modern military adventures. The book itself is based on interviews with Israeli leaders and IDF officers and soldiers (although there is no comprehensive list of them), tours of battlefields, and studies and publications (including a small number of Egyptian ones) already published by the mid-seventies. It contains a number of maps and illustrations that trace out the strategic situation of Israel and the tactical moves of the different armed forces. It also contains photographs that portray the main actors and some of the battlefields of the conflict. Throughout the book the author?s vast experience as a military commander and political commentator are used in order to illuminate the experience of the war. Herzog strives to provide a balanced view of the war by using material not only from Israeli records but also from Arab reports and commentary. Given that the author had very good access to Israeli material and given the rather secretive nature of the Egyptian and (especially) Syrian regimes, the book provides more details about the Israeli side of the conflict.

Herzog?s analysis begins by tracing out the broad geo-political situation in the Middle-East and the build-up of the Egyptian and Syrian forces before the war. Along these lines, the first chapters trace out the process that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat began in 1971 when he raised the possibility of a peace agreement with Israel should it return all the territories it had occupied in the 1967 Six Days' War. When no progress was made, Sadat threatened war which did not materialize that year or in the subsequent year and a half. During 1972 and 1973 Sadat initiated a concerted diplomatic offensive among a number of states around the world to win support for his cause. At the same time, he petitioned the Soviet Union to pressure the United States and provide his country with more offensive weapons and military wares with which to cross the Suez Canal. Since the Soviet leadership was more interested in detente with the United States than in confrontation in the Middle East, it rejected Sadat's demands. In response, he expelled approximately 20,000 (mainly military) Soviet advisers from Egypt.

While this was going on, as Herzog shows, the Arab forces studied Israel?s weaknesses and eventually surprised it by making it divide its forces between two theaters (the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights). Syria and Egypt also devoted resources to developing (on the basis of Soviet military advice) anti-aircraft and anti-tank umbrellas which were designed to force Israel to commit to an extended battle that would wear down its forces. The volume also shows the profound surprise that Israel?s leadership faced upon the beginning of the hostilities, and underscores Israel?s intelligence failure that was the outcome of smugness and underestimation of the Arab enemy and its capabilities and goals. Indeed, as Herzog (and later a long line of scholars and commentators) contends, this failure lay in the extraordinary military success of the Israelis in the Six Days' War of 1967 and the ways in which they explained away the developing power of Egypt and Syria. The intelligence failure has not only fueled debates over the years but been at the base of the complete revamping of Israel?s military intelligence services.

The following chapters of the book then show how, when thrust into defensive operations in two theaters, Israel mobilized its reserves and eventually repulsed the invaders. After providing riveting accounts of the war?s major battles Herzog explains how the fighting was subsequently carried into Syrian and Egyptian territory. During the second and third weeks of the war, the two Arab states began to be supplied by sea and air by the Soviet Union which rejected U.S. suggestions for an immediate ceasefire and hoped for a decisive Arab victory. As a result, however, the United States belatedly began its own airlift to Israel. At the end of the war, Egypt and Syria were saved from defeat through the intervention of the United Nations. The achievements of Syria and Egypt led to a restoration of national pride and to the peace accords signed between Israel and Egypt a few years later. As Herzog explains, the full scale military excursion into the Sinai Peninsula was planned by Sadat to proceed only a few kilometers into the Sinai and thus to provide a ?prod? towards the beginning of diplomatic efforts.

To what kind of readership does the volume appeal? Written in a clear and flowing style, Herzog has produced a book that will be of interest to anyone concerned with Middle-East affairs. Because it successfully mixes analyses of tactical and strategic issues, it provides an excellent introduction to the war and its long-term ramifications. Readers more interested in the tactical aspects of the conflict will enjoy the detailed descriptions of tank battles in the Sinai and Golan Heights, as well as the methods used by Arab forces to counter Israel's advantage in rapid mobile armor. The book also discusses stories of individual Israeli commanders and gives a firsthand account of several of their personal experiences. Intelligence specialists will find a valuable lesson regardiing how to interpret indications and warnings, understanding the elaborate deception plan concocted by the Egyptians and Syrians prior to the start of hostilities and the weaknesses of what Israelis call the ?conception?: the erroneous understanding of the Arab states and their capabilities and intentions.

Does the book stand the test of time? My answer is that it most certainly does. Herzog?s sketch of the broad contours of the war has not been superseded. No less importantly, the lessons that Herzog?s account raises about more general aspects of contemporary militaries still hold. While I have mentioned Israel?s intelligence failure that led to the complete overhaul of Israel?s military intelligence services, the book carries other lessons. First, the Yom Kippur War provides an important warning about the power of ?weaker? parties to a conflict to utilize the strengths of the stronger parties. It is in this light, for instance, that one may understand how Syria and Egypt realized the effectiveness of Israel?s Air Force and began to emphasize the development of air defense systems and ground-to-ground missiles. In a related manner, both Arab parties understood the speed with which IDF reserves could mobilize to answer their attacks and designed a plan to give the Israelis little time

for effective mobilization. Finally, the Arab plan also capitalized on the amount of infantry at their disposal and equipped them with antitank missiles and rocket-propelled grenades to counter Israel's reliance on mobile armor with relatively small numbers of infantry. These points later led to the development of the joint-force air-land battle and the understanding (on the part of Israeli military leaders) of the value of waging war in a synergic manner. A few years later, these understandings led to the establishment of the Israel Ground Forces Command, a first step towards the creation of an integrated command for the ground forces. Second, and this is a point made by Michael Herzog in his introduction, the ultimate success of the IDF in the Yom Kippur War and the growing gap between Israel and its Arab neighbors in military terms intensified the search for what may be termed the ?power of the weak.? This power now expresses itself in such low-tech means as suicide bombers or guerrilla warfare in order to counter Israel?s unquestioned military superiority. Third, within Israel, the October 1973 war intensified the debate about the future of Israel's control over the 1967 territories. Some groups interpreted the war as further evidence of the need to populate and strengthen these areas for security and strategic reasons, and as a result, Israeli settlements in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967 increased.

How does the book compare with more recent volumes published about the war? A variety of works have developed our understanding of the Yom Kippur War in different directions. First a plethora of much more focused memoirs and biographies–on both the Israeli and Egyptian sides–has been published regarding the war.[1] These volumes present individual perspectives on the war and inclusively provide a detailed picture of the various issues that Herzog analyzes or raises in his volume. As such, they seem to fill in the broad sketch lines that Herzog provides in his volume. Second, two new books, both by journalists, have recently been written with the aim of offering a general overview of the conflict. They thus provide a good reference point from which to judge the Herzog volume.[2] The first volume published in Hebrew by Ronen Bergman and Gil Meltzer presents more details and particular descriptions about the war–such as soldiers? and generals? voices and opinions–but does very little in the way of offering an extended analysis of the conflict. The second tome, by Abraham Rabinovitch, has been published in English and also contains many personal stories and additional information about the battles of the war. While this book does not impart any new insights about the conflict, the author was able to include greater detail about the long term effects of the war. Third, other, more scholarly works, have attempted to trace out the social and individual implications of the war.[3] These studies are much more academic and as a consequence are more focused on such issues as the life-stories of Israeli veterans of the Yom-Kippur War, the implications of the conflict for civil-military relations, or the psychology of combat.

To conclude, Herzog?s volume is still very much a required classic on the subject. Clearly and concisely written, there is much to learn from this book.

Notes

[1]. Memoirs written by Egyptians include, for instance, Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy *The October War* (Cairo: American University Press, 1987) and Mohammed Heikal *The Road to Ramadan* (New York: Ballantine, 1975). On the Israeli side see Ariel Sharon with David Chanoff *Warrior: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), Avraham Adan *On the Banks of the Suez* (San Francisco: Presido Press, 1980), Golda Meir *My Life* (Tel Aviv: Ma?ariv, 1977, Hebrew), Yuval Neriah *Fire* (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1989, Hebrew), Elyashiv Shimshi *Storm in October* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publications, 1986, Hebrew), and Eli Zeira *The Yom Kippur War: Myth vs. Reality* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonoth Books, 1993, Hebrew). Biographies include Hanoch Bar-Tov *Dado* (Tel Aviv: Ma?ariv, 1978, Hebrew), Arie Braun *Moshe Dayan and the Yom Kippur War* (Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1992, Hebrew), Uri Dan *Bridgehead* (Tel Aviv: E.L. Special Editions, 1975, Hebrew), Aviezer Golan *Albert* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonoth Books, 1977).

[2]. Ronen Bergman and Gil Meltzer, *The Yom Kippur War ? Moment of Truth* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahoronoth Books, 2003, Hebrew) and Abraham Rabinovich, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).

[3]. Yehuda Ben Meir, *Civil-Military Relations in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1995); Reuven Gal, *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Edna Lomsky-Feder, *As if There Was No War: The Life Stories of Israeli Men* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1998); Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

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