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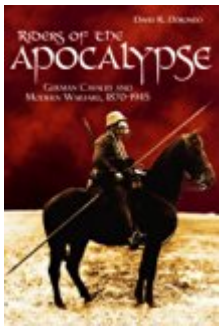

David R. Dorondo. *Riders of the Apocalypse: German Cavalry and Modern Warfare, 1870-1945.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 352 pp. $36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-086-6.

Reviewed by Ian Johnson

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Few armies have been studied so thoroughly as the German army between 1914 and 1945. Its tactical and operational successes, despite strategic (and moral) failings, have made it an enviable model to other militaries. Despite such scrutiny, several branches of the German army have been neglected. David R. Dorondo's newest work, ***Riders of the Apocalypse***, ably explores one of those rarely studied areas.

Dorondo begins his book by retracing the Western tradition of cavalry combat, and its role as the decisive arm on the battlefields of Europe. The challenges of pikes, then muskets, changed cavalry's role from the decisive charge toward the pursuit of broken enemy units. By the Franco-Prussian War, cavalry faced an uncertain future, retaining shock weapons, like the lance and sword, but finding few opportunities for shock combat.

Dorondo notes that at this uncertain time, European armies refused to learn the chief cavalry lesson of the American Civil War: that cavalry could no fight effectively as shock units against the firepower of infantry. Cavalry remained effective in the American Civil War when mounted units were transformed into "dragoons." These units used the superior mobility of their horses to encircle enemy units or raid deep behind enemy lines, but usually fought with gunpowder weapons while dismounted. Despite reluctance to adopt to battlefield realities, German cavalry still found limited roles during the Franco-Prussian War, such as reconnaissance and interdiction of enemy supplies.

The pace of technological change continued to shrink the role of cavalry in the early twentieth century. Cavalry saw little use on the western front in World War I. The limited roles from the Franco-Prussian War disappeared: airplanes were better for reconnaissance purposes and the static of the trenches left no need for finding or outflanking the enemy. However, Dorondo shows that on the eastern front, cavalry continued to perform some traditional roles, both providing reconnaissance and driving into the rear of Russian

forces. In particular, he describes the successes of the First Cavalry Division at Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes.

Dorondo shows particular interest in the "sunset" of European cavalry combat. He devotes the last three-fifths of his work to cavalry units in the German army between 1939 and 1945. Adolf Hitler's plan to construct a large mechanized army remained largely unfulfilled by the time war broke out. Dorondo makes the often-forgotten point that the German army of 1939 was powered by the horse. More than 2.5 million horses saw service in the German army, most as the primary means of transport of supplies from railheads to the front. The tremendous role of the horse in logistics is not Dorondo's principal interest, however. Rather, he focuses his attention on three combat units: the First Cavalry Division, the Eighth SS Cavalry Division, and the I Cavalry Corps.

The First Cavalry Division saw combat in Poland, France, and Russia, operating much as its predecessors had in 1870: finding and outmaneuvering enemy units. After Operation Barbarossa, the unit found itself less and less mobile due to weather conditions and loss of horses. The division's commander, Kurt Feldt, recognized that his unit's roles were performed more effectively by mechanized units. Based on his recommendation, the First Cavalry Division became the Twenty-Fourth Panzer Division in November 1941.

However, after the First Cavalry Division's dissolution, the SS--for reasons Dorondo concedes were as political as military--raised a cavalry brigade, later enlarged into the Eighth SS Cavalry Division. It was with the SS that horse cavalry found itself, for a moment, reinvented. Instead of its traditional roles--flanking, reconnaissance, and shock attack--cavalrymen were assigned to anti-insurgency roles, fighting Russian partisans in regions where mechanized units could not go.[2] The Pripet Marshes became their particular domain, as well as the focus of a number of ad hoc German cavalry units formed between 1941 and 1944.

In his final pages, Dorondo describes the end of Western mounted warfare. The American army, with its preponderance of mechanized equipment, ended the era of the horse in Europe. By 1945, U.S. supplies had effectively mechanized the British, Free French, and Soviet armies with enormous gifts of tanks, trucks, and jeeps. This concluded the presence of horse-powered units on the battlefields of Europe.

Dorondo's book complements existing works on German cavalry (such as Richard L. DiNardo's *Germany and the Axis Powers: From Coalition to Collapse* [2005]) because Dorondo focuses his efforts on German combat units and their continuing attempts to adapt themselves to twentieth-century warfare. Cavalry played a very limited auxiliary role in the combat of World War I and II. Nevertheless, the twilight of Western cavalry combat is a fascinating story which deserves to be told. Dorondo's obvious passion for horses and his thorough research make this a book that will be of considerable interest to specialists of the German army or of mounted combat.

Note

[1]. The Eighth SS Cavalry also committed numerous atrocities against civilians in the course of its deployment.

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[1]. David R Dorondo, *Riders of the Apocalypse: German Cavalry and Modern Warfare* **(**Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012),106.

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