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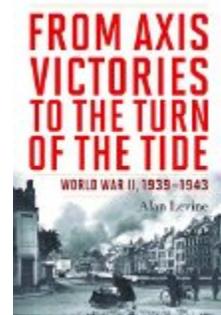
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan J. Levine. *From Axis Victories to the Turn of the Tide: World War II, 1939-1943*. Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2012. 360 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59797-711-1.

Reviewed by Tal Tov (Bar Ilan University)

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In 1943 the film *Sahara* starring the legendary actor Humphrey Bogart was released. The film describes the adventures of an American tank crew that was assigned to the Eighth Army in order to acquire battle experience and ends with the report that the British forces managed to halt the advance of the Afrika Korps at El Alamein, in what was later to be known as the First El Alamein Battle (July 1-27, 1942). The film was screened for the first time in November 1943, at the end of the year in which the Allied forces began to move on most fronts from stalling the enemy to attacking it. In the course of the film there are a number of indications that it was made during a turning point in the war against Nazi Germany, and the film reflects the American position that it was her moral power that would lead to victory. But the road to the final victory was still a long one.

As Richard Overy attests at the beginning of his book *Why the Allies Won*, it was difficult in 1942 to see how Germany and Japan could be defeated.[1] In the thirty months since the outbreak of the war in Europe, Germany had assumed control over most of the continent and large sections of western Russia, and in 1942 its forces were massing to conquer the oil fields of the Caucasus and the Middle East. Japan had succeeded in less than half a year to establish a new geo-strategic order by conquering Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Burma. The Japanese conquests were unprecedented even in comparison with the conquests of Germany, and by the middle of 1942 it had already begun threatening India and Australia. By contrast, the United States had not yet begun massive rearmament and lacked the trained forces it could have sent to the various war arenas. The Soviet Union was fighting for survival after having lost millions of soldiers and most of its industrial

infrastructure.

The book is a historical description of the Second World War from the time of its outbreak in Europe until 1943, the year of the reversal in the war. The book examines the battles and the main campaigns during those years together through a discussion of their influence on the war as a whole. The perspective of the book is both chronological and geographic, with emphasis on each of the war arenas, including the naval battle in the Atlantic Ocean, the eastern front, the Pacific Ocean, and North Africa. Naturally, most of the book deals with the war in Europe and with the secondary fronts of the European arena (the Balkans and North Africa). This is because the first two years were marked by the German offensive and its tremendous victories. Although Japan had already been conducting a war against China since the summer of 1937, the Chinese theater became directly involved with the Second World War only after the Japanese launched a combined attack against American and British holdings in East Asia and in the western part of the Pacific Ocean.

The final chapters of the book deal with the beginning of the reversal in the war. It should be remembered that in some of the war theaters we can already find battle reversals in mid-1942, such as those in the South Pacific (Coral Sea and Guadalcanal), the Central Pacific (Midway), and North Africa (El Alamein and Operation Torch). Thus Levine places emphasis on the moments of reversal in the war that in his opinion included, among other things, the entry of the United States into the war and the failure of the Germans to conquer the Caucasian oil fields. It is therefore possible to crudely divide the Second World War into two phases. The first was from the beginning until the year of the reversal, and the sec-

ond was from then until the end of the war on all fronts. According to this division, the first period which is dealt with in Levine's book is the important one. The reason for this is the fact that during the initial years of the war Germany and Japan succeeded in striking a mortal blow at the time-honored centers of power, France and Great Britain. This blow prevented them from recovering after the war, and allowed for the rise of new political power centers: the United States and the Soviet Union. It may be that the period dealt with in the book is the most critical one for the understanding of the postwar political history of the world.

One of the questions that arises when reading the book is whether Germany and Japan really had the ability to win the war. There is no doubt that in mid-1942 the two countries controlled huge empires from which they could have extracted the raw materials to conduct the war. But the strategy that the Axis forces employed was aimed at ending the war with a series of decisive battles on each of the different fronts. Here we enter a fascinating discussion about the way to achieve a decisive victory in war, a concept that has received various interpretations, which have in turn shaped various strategies for achieving total victory in war.

In his manual for the Prussian heir-apparent, *Principles of War* (1812), Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war has three main aims. The first is victory over the enemy forces and their destruction. Therefore it is always necessary to direct the main effort against the power center of the enemy. The second aim is to take control over the nonmilitary sources of assistance available to the enemy. This means the conquest of his country or at least a threat against his capital city and other strategic areas. The third aim is psychological victory by achieving decisive control or conquest of the capital city. The German historian Hans Delbrück deduced from his research that wars were conducted according to two main strategies: annihilation and attrition. He found proof for these two strategies in the book by Clausewitz, together with an analysis of the wars conducted by Frederick the Great and criticism of German strategy during the First World War.[2]

The aim of the annihilation strategy was to eliminate the enemy by a single and decisive act. The victory was to be achieved by bringing the army of the enemy into a situation of helplessness that would prevent it from continuing its opposition and fighting. According to Clausewitz's magnum opus *On War* (1832), the strategy of annihilation is based on a decisive battle, the results of which

achieve victory (or defeat).[4] This means that in one fell stroke, constituting a kind of one-time wager, the entire war would end. An outstanding example for this was the Battle of Austerlitz (December 1805). In a battle that lasted for six hours Napoleon crushed the remains of the Austrian army and defeated the Russian army. The results were to give Napoleon almost complete control over Europe in the next ten years. The outcome of one battle (at the tactical level) led to victory in war (the strategic level) and a change in the balance of forces in Europe (the political level). This approach asserts that war is a single organic unit in which everything depends on one decisive battle. Until that battle is waged, there is no victor or loser, and after it is over, there is no doubt who has won and who has lost.

In contrast to total defeat by a single dramatic measure, Clausewitz posed the strategic concept of attrition. This strategy was usually applied when there was insufficient military power to achieve decisive victory through annihilation. But its final results are no less effective than the strategy of annihilation. This is a cautious strategy which is defensive in nature, at least in its early stages, with results achieved through a cumulative process. Attrition is based on causing damage, destruction, and slow, continuous but not necessarily escalating efforts at wearing down the strength of the enemy. The process of attrition is not only physical but psychological. Therefore a war of attrition becomes a kind of "competition" in endurance ability. If we claim that the Napoleon strategy was based on a decisive battle as resulting from the strategy of annihilation, we can also say that Tsar Alexander I prevented Napoleon from conducting a decisive battle by acting according to the principles of the attrition strategy.

In studying the history of the Second World War we see that the warring sides adopted both strategies. Germany and Japan tried to win the war by decisive battles in the various arenas. The armies of the Axis powers concentrated most of their forces in one single tremendous effort. As an example one can cite the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The aim of Japan was to land a devastating blow on the Pacific fleet of the United States, a stroke that would allow Japan to conquer Southeast Asia. The continuation of the plan was for Japan to prepare a defense system that would be based on a chain of islands in the western part of the Pacific Ocean, and should the American navy return there the Japanese navy would have to destroy it in a naval battle, as it had destroyed the Russian navy in Tsushima. This simple description indicates the strategy of annihilation that Japan tried to

adopt against the United States. But during the course of 1943, when Japan went on the defensive at the strategic level, its forces could not withstand the attrition strategy conducted against it by the overwhelming power of the United States, which gradually turned into annihilation.

By contrast, the strategy of the Allies was based on attrition, at first because they had no choice and later on with the aim of destroying the Axis armies so that they could not be rehabilitated. The clash between the two strategies can be exemplified in the military maneuver that Germany imposed on the United States in the winter of 1944, the *Wacht am Rhein* campaign, which is known in American memory as the Battle of the Bulge. The German strategy was to destroy the American forces by a single offensive in order to reach the port of Antwerp and to destroy it, and to split the American and British forces. After the American forces recovered from the first surprise, reinforcements were sent in that gradually pushed the German forces back to their base of departure. The bombing of cities in Germany and Japan can also be classified under the category of attrition strategy.

If we examine the nature of attrition strategy we might conclude that from the moment the Axis countries failed to overcome the Allied forces, and the latter began to act in accordance with the strategy of attrition, the fate of Germany and Japan was doomed. At the same time, this is a problematic statement that derives from historical perspective and was written in the comfort of an air-conditioned workroom and near a cup of high-quality coffee. During the course of 1942 it did not seem possible to stop Japan and Germany. But for sake of a historical exercise together with a rereading of the book by Clausewitz, especially the seventh part which deals with attack, one can discern the progress of event that led to the year of reversal. Clausewitz claims that there are very few attacks that achieve peace (i.e., decisive victory) immediately. Most of them reach the culminating point that follows, and if no significant reinforcements arrive, the attacker will begin to be on the defensive and perhaps even retreat. Therefore the initial success of the attacker does not mean final victory. Also, if the attacker does not have sufficient reinforcements and the opposite side does, the strategy of attrition that will develop will gradually move towards the disadvantage of the one who attacked first. And in time the strategy of attrition will gradually turn into a strategy of annihilation.

It should be remembered that an attrition strategy was conducted by the Allied forces as a means of gaining time, to allow for the strengthening of the armies with

more soldiers and means of warfare, so as to change the balance of forces and thus to end the war. During the second half of 1942 the industrial complexes in the United States and in the Soviet Union began to give greater and greater support to the war effort, and general conscription, especially in the United States, filled the ranks of the army with a very high rate of recruitment. These trends were some of the factors that led to an incremental change in the strategic situation on all fronts. From a historical perspective the various battles waged during 1942 may be regarded as indicating that Germany and Japan were beginning to lose their initiative in offensive warfare, which became even clearer in the second half of 1943. During that year, the forces of Germany and Italy were subdued in North Africa, and the latter surrendered to the Allied forces as they began invading Italy. Germany lost its offense initiative after the failure of the battle in Kursk, and after it had suffered a harsh blow to its morale with the surrender of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad about half a year earlier.

This means that during 1943 Germany did not manage to fulfill the three precepts of Clausewitz as he defined them in *Principles of War*. Germany did not succeed in destroying the main force of the Red Army, it failed to conquer the Caspian Sea oil fields, and finally, it endured a painful defeat at Stalingrad. Although this was not the capital city, its very name—the city of Stalin—became the symbol of the fierce struggle between the two dictators. Hitler directed his armies towards the conquest of the city at the expense of a breakthrough effort in the south towards the Caucasus. In counteraction, Stalin ordered his army to hold on to the city at any price, and he also directed many forces there in order to save the city. The surrender of the Sixth Army was therefore a psychological victory—important for Russian morale. According to Clausewitzian logic, Germany and Japan did not have the chance to decisively crush the Soviet Union and certainly not the United States, mainly because of the very size of these two countries both geographically and demographically.

Levine focuses on the military history of the war during its early years. Using a rich variety of secondary sources, the author provides the reader with a clear tracing of the course of the war in the period when Germany and Japan were its initiators, and gradually leads the reader to the moments of reversal in the war. The book does not contain any new thesis or historical revelations. Its importance lies in the fact that Levine demonstrates how the turning point in the war was not a series of battles on the various war fronts but the ending of cer-